Interview with Eddy Nicklaus

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Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: Today is Thursday, January 27, 2011. My name is Mark DePue, the Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Actually, we're in Sterling, Illinois. It's snowing outside, and I'm sitting in the home of Eddy Nicklaus. Good morning.

Nicklaus: Morning.

DePue: Now, we've had plenty of snow this year, huh?

Nicklaus: We've had plenty of snow, Mark, yes, we have. Too much.

DePue: Eddy, I noticed you're wearing your USMC sweatshirt, (Nicklaus laughs) and even though it's snowing, you've got your Marine Corps flag flying outside, because obviously you're proud to have served in the Marines. We'll be talking especially about your service during the Vietnam War here today. At least that's what we're going to get to eventually.

Nicklaus: The new Commandant of the Marine Corps, who was just recently installed about two months ago, came out and officially said there is no such thing as a former Marine. We're all Marines, just in different stages of our life.

DePue: Is that an Act of Congress or an edict from the Marine Corps Commandant, or a matter of regulation?

Nicklaus: Yes. (laughter)

DePue: Okay, Eddy, let's start with when and where you were born.

Nicklaus: I was born in the hospital in Sterling, Illinois, on August 17, 1945. And I was born a twin. I'm the oldest of the two of us. Folks thought it would be cute if they named us Eddy Ray and Teddy Jay. So that was fine when you're one to five, maybe.

DePue: So Eddy is your given name?

Nicklaus: E-d-d-y, yep. Eddy Ray. And his was Teddy Jay, T-e-d-d-y, not Theodore. My folks lived in Rock Falls, and that's where I was born and raised and schooled, and graduated from Rock Falls Township High School in 1963.

DePue: Okay. Well, you're racing right through this. What did your dad do for a living?

Nicklaus: Dad, in '45, he worked for, I believe—oh, it was National Tea grocery store in Rock Falls. It was on the corner of West Second Street and Second Avenue. He was in the grocery business most of the years we were growing up, and then he bought his own grocery store up here on Broadway. And Dad being the kind of—

DePue: When you say "up here on Broadway," in Sterling?

Nicklaus: In Sterling, uh-huh. Being the kindhearted man he was, it was a neighborhood grocery store, and he ended up having more money on the books than he had in the cash register. So he had to close the business. When we were in eighth grade, that's when he closed the business and decided we would move to Arizona.

DePue: You know what year that would have been? Late '50s?

Nicklaus: Nineteen fifty-seven or '58, one of the two. So we moved to Arizona. My mom and sister didn't like that. My dad had a brother in Phoenix, and he had another brother in Austin, Texas, so we packed up the car again and moved to Austin, Texas. That would have been in the same year, '57 or '58. Went to school there. I actually did pretty well. I actually received a letter asking if I would be interested in being a pageboy at the state capitol building in Austin. But my brother and I, being the youngest, we didn't have much say in it. My mother and my sister were very homesick, and obviously they persuaded my dad to come back here.

DePue: What was drawing them back here? Did they have relatives in town?

Nicklaus: Yeah. My mom's whole family was back here, and a lot of my dad's family was back here. But I know it was my mom and my sister. She was in high school at the time, and I don't know, I guess they were so homesick they had to come back.

DePue: How many other siblings did you have?

Nicklaus: None. Sister and my twin brother.

DePue: Which one of the two of you is older?

Nicklaus: Of the twins?

DePue: Mm-hmm.

Nicklaus: I am. I was born first, by about seventeen minutes or something like that, I don't know.

DePue: Was it Sterling or Rock Falls you moved back to?

Nicklaus: Well, fortunately my dad did not sell his house at 1103 Tenth Avenue in Rock Falls—which, by the way, he built by himself, with his own two hands—laid every cement block, mortared it and laid it for the basement, and the whole ball of wax. But he leased that house. So when we came back in spring of…'59?—we must have went in '58 and came back in spring of '59—we stayed with one of my mom's brothers until the lease was up on the house, and then the guy who was leasing it had to move out, and we moved back into our house in Rock Falls.

DePue: Okay. What did your father do when he came back to here?

Nicklaus: When he came back, first he went back to work Parish Allford in Rock Falls, which was a spin-off of Northwestern Steel and Wire. But he had taken a test for the U.S. Postal Service, and shortly upon returning, he was hired by the U.S. Postal Service in Rock Falls. When you're hired, you start out as a substitute. He was a substitute clerk, not a carrier. Then he got hired on as a full-time clerk, and that's where he finished up his working career and retired from the U.S. Post Office in Rock Falls.

DePue: What grade were you in when you came back to Sterling, then?

Nicklaus: We were in eighth grade. We actually graduated from junior high school here in Rock Falls.

DePue: In Rock Falls, okay. Tell me about growing up with a twin in Rock Falls in the latter part of the 1950s and early sixties. What was that like?

Nicklaus: Oh, boy. A whole lot different than it is today. Bicycles weren't like the bicycles of today, of course. Everybody had a bicycle. All us kids had a bicycle. Lucky if we had fenders on them. We didn't care what they looked like. We rode them bicycles all over town. We'd ride them to Wallingford Park, we'd ride them to Dillon Park. I'd bet during the summer, just about every day we'd be riding to one of those ballparks, starting a game of sandlot

baseball. We both played; when we was eight years old, we played Little League, graduated into Babe Ruth, and then played high school baseball.

Well, I can remember growing up in Rock Falls. We would go to Dixon to visit my mom's sister; we would leave the back door open, we'd leave the screen door unlocked, obviously. Things were just so much—I don't know, more peaceful, I guess. People were more trusting. You didn't have to worry about all the things you need to worry about today. You didn't have to worry about people talking on their cell phone when they're driving, and people stopped at stop signs actually and so forth. But it was just a great time to grow up, in the '40s and '50s. I remember we just played baseball over in Wallingford Park in Rock Falls, and then we'd go to Plowman's—it might have been Plowman's Grocery Store, which was right across the street. I might have that mixed up; it might have been somebody else's grocery store. But we'd have a quarter, and we'd get a Pepsi and like a Suzy Q—but they didn't have Suzy Q's then—but cupcakes, and you'd still have change leftover, you know, from getting a pop and a cupcake. And it was nothing to ride someone on your handlebars on the bike when you was going or coming, no big deal. You certainly didn't wear helmets; you didn't worry about stuff like that. In the cars, of course, you didn't have seatbelts. I remember when we came back from Texas—well, when we went down there, actually, in the late '50s—we had a pink and black Studebaker, and that was our car. I can't remember when Dad got rid of that. It wasn't hard to see it coming, I'll tell you. (laughter)

DePue: Well, you mentioned "we" in several of these comments you made. Does that mean that wherever Eddy went, Teddy went?

Nicklaus: Oh, absolutely. Oh, yeah. I don't think one of us ever went somewhere without the other one.

DePue: Did your mom dress you the same?

Nicklaus: No. Well, you know, I've got some pictures of when we're probably one through five, maybe. We'd have several pictures of us being dressed just alike, but after that we got to the age where we could pretty much decide what we wanted to wear. No, matter of fact, we almost made a point not to dress alike.

DePue: How did most of your friends and buddies and family members tell the two of you apart?

Nicklaus: Well, a lot of times they had trouble, to be perfectly honest with you.

DePue: You had the same haircuts and…?

Nicklaus: Oh, yeah, same haircuts, same demeanor. I was a little taller, and I might have had a little pudgier face. But after you got to know us, I think it wasn't

too much trouble. But, I don't know, in school, (laughs) the teachers had some trouble sometimes. One time he was in line, or his teacher told him to get in line—this was like fourth or fifth grade—at Merrill School. Then our class came out and his teacher grabbed me and says, "I told you to get in line, back at the back of the line." And I looked at her, and I said, "Who you"—you know, "I'm not your student." (DePue laughs) She said, "Oh," and she looked up, and there was Ted, standing back there where she told him to. So that was just once instance.

DePue: You didn't take advantage of that ever, did you, the two of you?

Nicklaus: (laughs) We had an assembly in high school, and we both took a journalism class, and the assembly was a memory expert. So he come in, in my brother's journalism class, and he was going to memorize all their names. And so then the journalism teacher came to me and says, "When his class goes down there, you go down there and leave him up here. We're going to play games with this memory expert." So then I went down there, and he said, "Your name's Ted," and I said, "No, it's not Ted." And so then to make a long story short, I said, "My name's Ed." And then Ted stood up. I don't think he really was very happy about it. (laughter) But that's just some of the fun we had with it.

DePue: What was the difference in personalities? Was there any? What were the differences?

Nicklaus: I was probably a little more outgoing, probably a little more aggressive, maybe. It wasn't real noticeable, but if there was any difference, that was probably about what it would be.

DePue: I know that you had mentioned when we talked earlier about an accident that your brother had that would have made a difference between the two lives.

Nicklaus: Yeah, we were playing football in the backyard with my brother-in-law and his brother.

DePue: How old were you at this time, then?

Nicklaus: Oh, I'm guessing we were probably eleven, twelve years old, maybe.

DePue: But you said your brother-in-law. You were playing—wasn't your brother-in-law—

Nicklaus: Yeah, I guess it would be my brother-in-law. Well, I must have been older than eleven or twelve then because he was married to my sister. She's about four years older than we are. She got married when she was a senior in high school, too. So that would make us, what, then, maybe fourteen, something like that. So anyway, Ted and I were playing against these two yo-yos, and—I can say yo-yo here and that's okay? Okay. She's not married to him anymore either, and so… Anyway, the brother-in-law's brother decided when he come

in to try to tackle Ted that he'd be smart and cute and throw a stick. He threw a stick and hit him in the eye. Well, that ended the football game. Then I remember Ted was laying on the couch in the living room, and I told Mom and Dad, "You know, you better take him to the hospital, because he could lose his eye." Of course, they thought he was going to be all right. But anyway, I kept insisting. I don't know, for some reason I just had a feeling. To make a long story short, they took him to the hospital and they did surgery right then and there. They took the eye out of the socket and laid it on his cheek, and they had to stitch it up, the black pupil.

DePue: So he had punctured his eye.

Nicklaus: Yeah, yeah. And for the rest of his life, instead of having a round black pupil in his left eye, he had a—it was round on the top and then a little oblong piece.

DePue: Tell us a little bit more about Rock Falls, and Sterling. Maybe there's a difference between the two, and maybe there isn't.

Nicklaus: Well, back in our days when we were going to school, especially high school, Sterling was the rival.

DePue: I mean, it's just one side of the river versus another.

Nicklaus: Oh, absolutely, yeah, but you didn't like anything on their side of the river and they didn't like anything on our side of the river. I remember one time we had a football game. We always tried to play pranks on the other team, and I think we went over there and ran something up their flagpole. I can't remember. It seems like it was a Rock Falls towel or something. And they were doing the same stuff to us. But, you know, Rock Falls was a pretty simple town. It wasn't a very big down. There was the downtown district and S&K men's clothing store, and had a couple grocery stores, and had a lot of taverns. And that was about it, and the regular buildings, stores that you have.

DePue: Did Northwestern Steel and Wire dominate the two communities?

Nicklaus: Absolutely. Northwestern Steel and Wire was started back around the turn of the century, in the 1900s, by Dillon. There was mainly three employers in town: there was Northwestern Steel and Wire, there was Lawrence Brothers, and there was National Manufacturing. I would say at the peak, Northwestern Steel and Wire probably employed about five thousand, Lawrence Brothers probably employed maybe two to three, and National maybe about the same as Lawrence Brothers. So they were your main employers.

DePue: Those are pretty big manufacturers for a relatively small community.

Nicklaus: Oh, absolutely. Yeah. And that's what brought a lot of people to this area, was the mill. Especially a big Hispanic population moved in after the war to work

at the mill. You know, the mill was booming after World War II, with the steel demand. And it continued to boom until the ‘80s when foreign competition set in. Well, the Dillons sold it, and then, to make a long story short, the mill ended up closing its doors. It just closed its doors, and the new owners walked out with their pockets full and left the employees with nothing.

DePue: That’s much later, though, much after the timeframe we’re going to be talking about today.

Nicklaus: Yeah. Right, yeah.

DePue: What did you and Eddy—excuse me, you and Teddy—get involved in in high school, activity-wise?

Nicklaus: Well, we played football four years.

DePue: Position?

Nicklaus: Offensive halfback, defensive halfback. Played basketball for two years, then we saw that wasn’t going anywhere, being our height, and basketball just wasn’t our sport. So after our sophomore year, we didn’t go out for that anymore. We went to a friend’s house and lifted weights for two years. And then we did track for four years and played baseball; it was a summer sport then for the high school. We were in the “R” club, and I can’t remember too many other things.

DePue: This is the years after World War II, and of course, Korea as well, but in most prominent memory, people remembered World War II. But a lot of kids were playing soldier—

Nicklaus: Oh, absolutely.

DePue: —and cowboys and Indians? Did you do that kind of stuff?

Nicklaus: Absolutely. Oh, yeah, we played a lot of cowboys and Indians, a lot of soldier, good guy–bad guy, Indian–cowboy. Yeah, we did a lot of that. I can remember a lot of guns. Yeah, we had regular—well, sometimes we’d use sticks, it all depended. (DePue laughs)

DePue: Did any of that spark an interest in the military at the time? By the time you got into high school were you kind of thinking that the military might be an option?

Nicklaus: I don’t think initially when we got into high school; I don’t think we did, no. I think not until about our senior year when we decided, you know, what are we going to do here?

DePue: What year did you graduate?

Nicklaus: Nineteen sixty-three.

DePue: Nineteen sixty-two, the Cuban Missile Crisis comes along, and that galvanizes a lot of people's attention because it looks like we might be in the big one with the Soviet Union. Do you remember anything about that?

Nicklaus: You know what, Mark? That was so far away and so removed from my world at the time that I'm probably more familiar with it now than I was what was happening then. It wasn't the spark that sent us into the Marine Corps, no.

DePue: What did send you in the Marine Corps?

Nicklaus: (laughs) Well, I think maybe I mentioned earlier to you that I was thinking about going to school and trying to play baseball.

DePue: Going to college.

Nicklaus: Yeah, college, and play baseball, maybe at Western or someplace. Ted says, "Well, let's go talk to the Marine recruiter." "Marine recruiter?" I said, "You know how hard them guys [are]? If we go talk to a recruiter, let's go talk to somebody else." "Well," he said, "let's just go talk to him." So actually it was his persuasion that led us to go to the Sterling Coliseum here in town, Gunny Greenwood, Gunnery Sergeant Greenwood, recruiter. And next thing I know, we're enlisted in the Marine Corps, in February of— we're still seniors, delayed-entry program—February of 1963.

DePue: Did you have to have your parents' approval to do that?

Nicklaus: We did because we were only seventeen years old.

DePue: What was your folks' reaction to it?

Nicklaus: Oh, they didn't have any problem with it. You know, there wasn't really anything going on at that time that they could see any problem with us going in the Marine Corps. I mean, when I say "anything going on," like Korea or…

DePue: Well, the military was involved in the Vietnam War at that time, but only as advisors; there weren't any actual ground units there.

Nicklaus: Right, right. I don't think at that time anybody thought that it would escalate into what it did.

DePue: How was it that Gunny Greenwood was able to convince you to join the Marines? That the other branches weren't worth your effort?

Nicklaus: (laughs) I guess he was just a good recruiter, a good salesman. You know, he was persuasive and convincing and convinced us that we would make good Marines, and that's what we should do. And we're sitting there, you know,

seventeen-year-old, naïve teenager, Yeah, yeah, yeah, okay. You get to go to San Diego, California, and, Oh, you know, yeah, that sounds pretty enticing.

DePue: Any comments about the uniform?

Nicklaus: I don't remember anything necessarily about the uniform, just the fact that you get to be a Marine. I think he expounded upon—of course, "the few, the proud" wasn't around back then—but they still emphasized the intent of that.

DePue: I forgot to ask you if your father had been in the military during World War II, perhaps.

Nicklaus: He tried to get in the military. We weren't born yet; we were born at the end of World War II ,as a matter of fact, just a few days after V-J Day. He was down in Arizona at the time. He was working in some factory, and he tried to enlist but they wouldn't take him because of his hearing, for one thing. He had a hearing loss. And then he had something else wrong with him. I don't remember what it was. But they rejected him, so no, he didn't serve.

DePue: Okay. Did you have a girlfriend at the time this happened?

Nicklaus: The time what happened?

DePue: When you guys enlisted?

Nicklaus: Yeah, yeah, I sure did, yeah.

DePue: Serious, or…?

Nicklaus: Well, I married her. (laughter)

DePue: Sounds pretty serious. What was her feeling about you and Teddy enlisting, then?

Nicklaus: Oh, I don't think she was real crazy about it. She was a junior at Sterling High School, and we were seniors over in Rock Falls. I told her, and I think she cried a little bit. You know, that was about the extent of it. And I said, "Well, that's what we're going to do."

DePue: Then what happened after graduation? You graduated in June of '63?

Nicklaus: June of '63, and a week later we were catching a bus out of Rock Falls to Des Moines, Iowa, to the Reserve center there, and raise our hand, take our oath. They give us train tickets. We take a train out to LA, where we're met by a bus from MCRD, Marine Corps Recruit Depot, San Diego, with the drill instructor on it. We got off of that train, and we got on that bus, and our whole world changed.

DePue: You mean the drill instructor wasn't as nice as Gunny Greenwood was?

Nicklaus: Not even close. (laughter) He wasn't nice at all. (laughter)

DePue: Where'd you end up taking basic training, then, Camp Pendleton?

Nicklaus: No, Marine Corps Recruit Depot, San Diego, California. The Marine Corps has—they call them MCRD, Marine Corps Recruit Depots—one at Pendleton, one at Parris Island [North Carolina]. It's a separate facility. It's not even on Pendleton. They're separated. Pendleton's north of MCRD.

DePue: What was your expectation going into boot camp of what it would be like?

Nicklaus: You know, I think Greenwood didn't lie to us too much. He told us it would be tough, and it was. I think the mental game they played with you was tougher than actually the physical game. There was a lot of physical training, to be sure, but that was—yeah, we were in pretty good shape. We only weighed probably 130 pounds, and we felt they could do just about anything they wanted us to do or made us do. But it was the mental aspect, the way they kept getting in your face and calling you—they didn't call you a Marine. I'll tell you, they called you a lot of things that you don't want me to put on this tape, I'll tell you.

DePue: Well, I don't mind hearing it...

Nicklaus: (laughs) A lot of derogatory things about you, your mother, your father, your—anybody. Your mother and father must have been divorced, and yadda yadda. They'd just go on and on.

DePue: Were you and Teddy in the same training platoon?

Nicklaus: Yep, yep, sure were. Matter of fact, I don't know if Lori, my wife, found it or not, but there was a picture in the paper. There was four of us that actually went in together from Rock Falls. The other two is John Lamz, and the other one was Chico Fernandez, who had later, when he got out, changed his name to Chico Bailey.

DePue: Fernandez was his original name?

Nicklaus: That was his name in high school, but then he changed it to Bailey. I don't know the whole story behind that. But the four of us went in together. The caption of the picture in the *Daily Gazette*—and I have it somewhere—shows the four of us standing there, and Greenwood sitting at a desk, and we're standing behind him. The caption is "Double trouble for some drill instructor."

DePue: This is before you actually shipped out, then?

Nicklaus: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. So I don't know if we actually gave them double trouble. Nobody gave them guys trouble. (laughs)

DePue: Well, I imagine the drill sergeants had some fun with having identical twins.

Nicklaus: No, they never really messed with us too much. We were house mouses. That means you go into where the drill instructors' officers are, and you clean it and whatnot, and that was pretty much reserved for people that—I don't want to brag, but I'd say that excel pretty much in the performance of what they wanted us to do at boot camp. Kind of an honor thing to get.

DePue: It's an honor to be a house mouse?

Nicklaus: An honor to be a house mouse, yeah, yeah. I don't know if I really considered it to be an honor, but that's what they told us, anyway. There was only three of us, three people out of probably about sixty that were house mouses.

DePue: Why did they call it house mouse?

Nicklaus: We went into their house. You know, these were Quonset huts that we lived in out in San Diego. I don't know if you're familiar with a Quonset hut. It looks like a chicken coop. And we would go in there and, like I say, straighten things up or do whatever they wanted us to do or clean it and sweep the floor, yadda yadda. So all we were was just…

DePue: Glorified house boys I would say.

Nicklaus: There you go, there you go. Yeah. I don't know what honor it was, to be perfectly honest with you. (laughter)

DePue: Did that mean you didn't have to clean the latrines back in the barracks or something else?

Nicklaus: No, that didn't mean that at all.[1] No, we had to take care of our own Quonset hut as well.

DePue: Did you guys have to pull KP occasionally?

Nicklaus: Not at boot camp. Well, yes, I did—yeah, we did both pull—matter of fact, there again, they took about eight people out of our recruit platoon for one week, and they picked the top eight people from PT scores and let them go on KP. Ted and I were both in the top eight, so we both had KP for a week in boot camp. That was great—get away from the drill instructors and around all that food, so we hated to see that week end.

DePue: See, I was thinking KP would be a punishment—just the opposite.

[1] E.N. provided this note to the transcription: In the Marine Corps a latrine is called a "head", as in the Navy.

Nicklaus: Oh, no, not then. (laughs) It was something to look forward to. I mean, you had to get up early and work late, but it wasn't too bad.

DePue: What was it like going through the mess halls, then, during basic?

Nicklaus: Very regimental. You walked in at attention, you held your tray at attention, you shuffled down the line. You didn't tell them what you wanted or what you didn't want; they put everything on your tray, and you adhered to the sign that said "Take all you want and eat all you take." The drill instructors were standing by the garbage cans on your way out, and if you didn't clean up your tray, you went back and sat down till you cleaned it up.

DePue: How long did they give you to eat?

Nicklaus: Not very long. You ate in a hurry. You learned to eat in a hurry—ten, fifteen minutes—and then as soon as you got done, you'd fall out in your platoon formation, and you'd stand there and you'd study the general orders or Marine Corps history or whatever it was until everybody was done, and then go back to your training.

DePue: What weapons did you train on in basic training?

Nicklaus: Actually, there wasn't a whole lot of weapons training. The only weapon that we qualified with and actually fired was the M14 [rifle].

DePue: It was the M14 at that time, not the M1?

Nicklaus: No, no, no. We qualified with the M14 at Camp Matthews.

DePue: Okay. How long was basic training for you, then?

Nicklaus: Probably about thirteen weeks, I think. I know the rifle range was two weeks of that training, so. They put a lot of emphasis on weapons qualification. You did a lot of snapping in, and then you did pre-quals, and then qualifications. And if you didn't qualify, then that was not good.

DePue: Do you recall roughly when you completed basic, then, what month that would have been?

Nicklaus: Yeah, I think it was, let's see, June, July August, September… The end of September, first of October, somewhere in there.

DePue: Where to after that?

Nicklaus: Then they put us on a bus and we went to Camp Pendleton. That's when we went to what they called at that time ITR, Infantry Training Regiment. And that's where we got associated with the M60, the 3.5 rocket launcher, the M79, even the BAR [Browning Automatic Rifle] at that time. They had that

there, and we fired that. When we stepped off of the bus at San Onofre, at Camp Pendleton, that's the first time they referred to us as Marines. And we were shocked.

DePue: Did that feel pretty good?

Nicklaus: Yeah. We expected the same kind of treatment there that we got from the drill instructors. But then from that point on it was, you know, you're a Marine, and we'll address you as such.

DePue: When you initially enlisted, did you enlist to go into the infantry as a branch?

Nicklaus: No.

DePue: When did that decision happen?

Nicklaus: When we got done with boot camp, we were assigned MOSs. [Military Occupational Specialty]

DePue: They didn't ask you.

Nicklaus: No. (laughs) They didn't ask us, no. No. I would say probably at least 75 to 80 percent if not more were 0311.

DePue: And 0311 was the—

Nicklaus: Infantry. Eleven bravos. Equivalent to 11 bravo in the Army.

DePue: Okay. Was that your expectation when you joined the Marines in the first place?

Nicklaus: Probably. Probably. I remember we took some skill tests, and one of them was on a typewriter. One of the things I did well in high school, junior and senior year I took typing classes. I got pretty good at typing. So I thought, well, maybe they'll see that I'm a pretty good typist and maybe they'll just make me an old clerk. But that didn't happen.

DePue: You would have been okay with that?

Nicklaus: I would have been okay with that. You know when they made me a clerk? When I come back from Vietnam, (laughter) three years later. They said, "Oh, you can type." "Yeah, I can type." "Well, we'll make you a clerk." Well, where have you guys been the last three years?

DePue: They needed infantry in Vietnam.

Nicklaus: They needed infantry in Vietnam.

DePue: I was asking you the timeframe here because I was wondering where you were at in your military career on November 22, 1963, when Kennedy was assassinated.

Nicklaus: We were at Camp Pendleton. Then, we were done with ITR, so we must have been— that was 1963, right?

DePue: Right.

Nicklaus: Well, yeah, 1963. Because we were with India Company, 3rd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division, at San Mateo. Pendleton's broken down into a lot of camps: San Mateo, San Onofre, Los Pulgas, and different camps. We were at Mateo. And I think we were up in the Cleveland National Forest on Pendleton, and I remember we were getting ready to do some training, and at nighttime they told us all to get back on the six-bys.

DePue: Six-bys?

Nicklaus: Six-bys. That's what we called them. Pretty similar to Army deuce-and- a-half.[2] The next thing we know, we're being transported back to our barracks at San Mateo. Nobody at that time knew what was going on when we got there. Then we all got back in the squad bay, and that's when they got us all together and said, "The President of the United States has been shot and killed." We were pretty shocked. We didn't know what was going to happen then. So it was a shock, and everyone was just , Wow. Here we are in the military and our commander-in-chief has been killed? You know, this doesn't happen. When was the last time a president's been assassinated? It was Garfield or McKinley or—

DePue: McKinley, I think.

Nicklaus: Yeah, McKinley. So it took some time to get over it.

DePue: Did they allow you to watch any of the services on TV because he was—

Nicklaus: No, no.

DePue: Was there any kind of memorial service for it?

Nicklaus: Not that I recall. I can't believe we didn't do something, but if we did, it wasn't significant enough that it sticks in my mind, anyway. But I certainly remember the day. I remember it well.

DePue: Then after you completed ITR, you stayed at Camp Pendleton, were assigned to this infantry line company?

[2] A six-by and a deuce-and-a-half are both six wheeled trucks.

Nicklaus: Uh-huh.

DePue: How long were you there? What kind of training did you receive there?

Nicklaus: Well, we stayed with India Company the end of ’63 all the way through ’64, up until March of ’65.

DePue: Now, before you get there, how much did your drill instructors and your instructors at ITR put your training in the context of, Hey, we’re fighting over in Vietnam right now, or…?

Nicklaus: None.

DePue: Didn’t come up at all?

Nicklaus: No.

DePue: Did you even know that we were in Vietnam at the time, fighting?

Nicklaus: I don’t think I even knew or heard of Vietnam, to be perfectly honest with you. No.

DePue: The intensity of the training, what kind of training, then, did you receive in ’64 while you were there?

Nicklaus: Several lock-ons. A lock-on is when you’re locked onto the base because you’re going to be in training for like two to three weeks, and you go out to the boonies and you do patrols, you do forced marches. It wasn’t anything unusual for us to do ten-, fifteen-mile forced marches. I think a lot of our training at that time was still geared toward the World War II, Korean type of training, because at that time there wasn’t a whole lot of experience with Vietnam until later in the year. Then we went up to the mountains, and they actually had lumber and stuff, and we built little huts. Our platoon were mock villagers, and other Marine Corps platoons within our battalion would come through there like we were a Vietnam village. But we weren’t dressed like Vietnamese or anything like that. We were dressed in civilian clothes. So I guess it was kind of the start of maybe changing the attitude of the training, but even with that training, that particular training, Vietnam was still not forefront in our mind.

DePue: So they weren’t necessarily framing this particular training exercise as, this is what it’s going to be like, or what it’s like in Vietnam?

Nicklaus: Yeah, I’m not sure if it had some connotation to Vietnam or if it was just a different way of providing training, because you know as well as I do, even in Korea they went through small villages; in World War II, they went through small towns.

DePue: Or places in Central America.

Nicklaus: Absolutely. Yeah.

DePue: What was going on with your relationship with this girlfriend that you had back in Sterling?

Nicklaus: (laughs) In June of '64, I came home and we got married, June seventh of 1964. Carol was her name.

DePue: What was her last name?

Nicklaus: Riser, R-i-s-e-r. Very nice person, and still is, and we still get along very well. But we got married in June '64. She got pregnant right away, and March twelfth of 1965, she gave birth to our oldest son, Brett.

DePue: Brett?

Nicklaus: Brett, B-r-e-t-t. And March thirteenth of 1965, the very next day, I boarded the USS *Breckenridge* for the trip across the ocean.

DePue: When you first got married, there was no expectation you'd be shipping out anytime soon, I take it.

Nicklaus: See, every Marine Corps unit at Pendleton usually did a tour of duty over in Okinawa, usually about a thirteen-month tour of duty over in Okinawa.

DePue: Was that an accompanied or an unaccompanied tour?

Nicklaus: You mean with spouses and dependents?

DePue: Yes, yes.

Nicklaus: Unaccompanied.

DePue: Unaccompanied?

Nicklaus: Unaccompanied, yeah. I knew that we would eventually go over there.

DePue: And she was okay with that?

Nicklaus: Well, yeah, I guess she was. She didn't have much choice, nor did I.

DePue: (laughs) Had you signed up for a three-year active duty tour, then?

Nicklaus: Four-year.

DePue: Four years?

Nicklaus: Yeah. The thing of it was, the first sergeant told me that if the baby wasn't born before we left, before the ship left port, that I could stay back until the baby was born and then catch a plane to Hawaii and meet them in Hawaii. So I went to him and I said, "Hey, Top, this kid is not even a day old yet." And he said, "Hey, a deal's a deal." He said, "I tell you what, I'll let you use my Jeep and my driver, and he'll take you to the hospital on March thirteenth, in the morning. Take all your gear. And you can stop by the hospital and see your wife and see your child and then proceed on to the port in San Diego." So that was my, I don't know what you want to say.

DePue: The first sergeant was probably presenting this as a very generous offer.

Nicklaus: Very generous offer, very generous, yep. See what a nice guy I am? (laughter) Yeah, that was. But when I left, my wife was still in the hospital and my baby was still in the—what do they call it?

DePue: The nursery there?

Nicklaus: Nursery.

DePue: Did she have any choice words for you as you were leaving?

Nicklaus: No, not that I can remember, just probably the old stuff, you know, Be careful, love you, and all that stuff. I don't know, maybe she threw something at me when I walked out the door or something. I don't think so.

DePue: By that time, did she have a lot of—well, the unit was deploying, so did she know a lot of the other girls in the unit that she could…?

Nicklaus: She knew some of the other wives. But my mother was out there. My mother had come out there to take care of her and the baby when they got out of the hospital, and then she drove them back to Illinois.

DePue: Did the Marine Corps provide housing for you? For her?

Nicklaus: When I left for my deployment?

DePue: Mm-hmm.

Nicklaus: No.

DePue: Where were you living prior to that time?

Nicklaus: In San Clemente, California.

DePue: Had just rented a place?

Nicklaus: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, apartment.

DePue: And you said she went back to Illinois.

Nicklaus: She came back here, to Sterling, lived with her mom and dad for the thirteen months that I was gone.

DePue: How much did the Marine Corps, then, tell you about what was going on in Vietnam before you shipped?

Nicklaus: Well, we had a battalion formation and a battalion command—this is at Pendleton, San Mateo, just prior to our departing. Like an inspection. Lay out all your 782 gear and all this and that stuff—782 gear being the same as TA-50. Called it 782 gear because you sign a form 782. That's pretty original, huh? (laughter)

DePue: It's the military way of doing things.

Nicklaus: That's right, that's right. Anyway, the battalion commander stood out there on a little podium and had a loudspeaker, and that's the first time that anyone made mention of the fact that we would probably not be pulling a regular overseas tour of duty with Okinawa, Japan, Mount Suribachi—or not Suribachi, Fujiyama? Whatever mountain is in Japan.

DePue: Mount Fuji?

Nicklaus: Yeah. We would probably be going to Vietnam. Well, that's when everybody started looking and said, well, what's Vietnam? (DePue laughs) Well, where's Vietnam? Why are we going to Vietnam? You know, that's a long boat ride over to Oki. That's where we went. Well, on our ride over, we stopped at Hawaii. We got to get off the ship, and we were off it probably seven hours. Got back on, then we went to Yokohama, Japan, got off there for a little bit. I remember a bunch of us walked into a bar in Yokohama, and we sat down at this big table, because there were probably about seven or eight of us. And for every guy that sat down, here come a girl, sat next to him. And we ordered a drink, and of course they all wanted a drink. We're naïve and young and stupid. So we buy them all a drink. Well, to make a long story short, we haven't been paid for a long time, so by the time we pay for the drink, we're almost broke. Well, the girls get up and leave when they find out we're almost broke, which that's fine anyway. So we ended up buying a couple bottles of sake and we go sit in some street somewhere in Yokohama and drink our sake and then go back in the ship. That was our stay in Yokohama.

DePue: Was Teddy with you at the same time?

Nicklaus: Yeah.

DePue: You two were still assigned to the same company?

Nicklaus: Yep.

DePue: Same platoon?

Nicklaus: He was on the same ship. No, different platoons. I was in 1st Platoon India Company; he was in 2nd Platoon India Company.

DePue: Did the Marines have a policy about siblings serving together?

Nicklaus: Well, if they did, they didn't tell us about it, because we were together. Now, it changed when we got to Vietnam. I also found out—from what I've been told—was when we got to Vietnam, my dad was asked, "You got two sons over there. They're the only two sons you have. If you would like to bring one of them home, which one would you want to bring home?" Well, he said, "I can't make that decision." So they said, "Okay, well, we'll just leave them both over there, then."

I always remember telling Dad, "Why didn't you tell them me? (DePue laughs) You know, I could have made the decision for you." (laughter)

DePue: Well, Teddy—

Nicklaus: But I could understand the position he was in. You know, if he would have picked me and Ted would have got killed, or picked Ted and I would have got killed, think how he would have felt. So I don't blame him. I never did blame him; we just always had a lot of fun with it. But I think he felt bad, but we tried to make him—"Don't feel bad; it ain't your fault." But yeah, we were together. We got to Okinawa, and then we went up to the northern training area in Okinawa, which was a lot of jungle training and night compass marches et cetera, et cetera. We got done with that.

We were at Camp Hanson, and then we started raider training, extensive raider training: rubber boats, rappelling, slide for life, stuff like that. We were actually supposed to pull a mission aboard a submarine. We were supposed to board it in Okinawa, take it down to the Philippines where it would surface enough to get the rubber rafts off, we'd get in rubber rafts, paddle to the shore, and then come back. We did a lot of swimming, too, in that ocean. But that never materialized. The Navy never provided the submarine. Leave it to the Navy. So we finished our raider training, and, Okay, you're ready, let's go, and we went to Vietnam.

DePue: Had you received any cultural or language training?

Nicklaus: No. No, no. Didn't know anything about the culture, didn't know anything about their language. I'm sure maybe somebody did—in the military intelligence world, maybe—but certainly not our world.

DePue: Did you understand that your Marine unit was going to be one of the first units to go into Vietnam as a unit?

Nicklaus: Yeah, we understood that we would be the first full-landing battalion. There were Marines there, but they'd only been there for about three months. We were the first full landing battalion that landed at Da Nang for a complete tour of duty.

DePue: When you say "complete tour of duty," what did that mean to you at the time?

Nicklaus: Well, I don't know. I guess we didn't know if that was going to be another thirteen months there or if that was just going to be until our thirteen months from the time we left in March would be over. And that's what it turned out to be. So around April, we started coming home—not all of us at one time—two or three at a time.

DePue: Okay, and we'll get to that at the end, but I think it is important. Most people's understanding of the Vietnam War is you went as an individual and you returned as an individual, and that was definitely not the case for you and for Teddy.

Nicklaus: No, we went as a unit. Matter of fact, we went as Alpha Company, 1st Battalion, 9th Marine Regiment, 3rd Marine Division, which acquired the moniker of the Walking Dead over there.

DePue: Alpha Company, 1st Battalion, 9th Marine Regiment—

Nicklaus: Third Marine Division.

DePue: Third Marine Division. Which platoon were you assigned in?

Nicklaus: First.

DePue: And for Teddy?

Nicklaus: Ted was in second.

DePue: What was your position? What was your job?

Nicklaus: Well, first, when we was at NTA and raider trading in Okinawa, I was a fire team leader. Then the platoon commander, Pete Loquer, said that I was going to be his radioman. We didn't have RTOs in the Marine Corps like the Army has. You just pick some schmuck out of the platoon. I was told at one of our reunions we had here a few years ago by one of the sergeants over there that the reason Pete wanted me as his radioman, he said, "Because you were the fastest runner in the platoon, and he wanted to have the fastest runner as his radioman in case he had to send a message afoot." I thought, Well, ain't that great. I get to hump a radio and extra batteries just because I'm… That didn't make me very fast, I'll tell you that. But it was a position that once I took it, I enveloped it, and I'm proud to have done it.

DePue: But you didn't volunteer for it (Nicklaus laughs) and you couldn't argue about it once you received the assignment?

Nicklaus: Nope, they didn't ask me, they told me. And I didn't know anything about radios. We had PRC-10s (pronounced prick), Prick-10s at the time, when we went down there. The squads had PRC-6s, you know, them little handheld curved things?

A PRC-10, you had to calibrate. Well, I had no clue how to calibrate a PRC-10.

DePue: What was the range of the radio, do you recall?

Nicklaus: Probably if you had the whip antenna on and you weren't in the mountains or the jungle, you could probably get out, I'd say quite a ways—probably two, three miles, probably, with the whip antenna on, and the other people had the whip antenna on as well.

DePue: Well, looking from our perspective today in 2011 with everybody walking around with a cell phone that you can talk to anybody else in the world, two or three miles maybe doesn't sound like much.

Nicklaus: No, no. You know, I told you that I was over in Desert Shield/Desert Storm, but even the communication system there was tenfold over what it was in Vietnam.

DePue: I wonder what you and your buddies thought about the Vietnam War, why you were there. Did you even have conversations with some of the other Marines about that?

Nicklaus: Yeah, sure, we talked. We felt that we were there because our country sent us there, and we felt our country would not send us someplace unless we were needed. And if there wasn't a purpose, they wouldn't send us there. So we felt that we had a purpose and that we were needed and that what we were doing was critical to the good and welfare of our country. And we were proud to do it. We were proud to be there.

After we were there for a while, we started hearing about these protestors back home, even then, in late '65. Well, then we acquired a real dislike for protestors. And matter of fact, I say to this day I have more respect for a North Vietnamese Army soldier who at least performed the duties that his country demanded of him than I do for a protestor who stood back here, whining and crying over something he knew very little or nothing about. And I don't have a great deal of respect for a protestor today. I'm really sorry to see—I forget who the president was that granted the amnesty to all the Canadians…

DePue: That was Carter.

Nicklaus: Carter. Carter—go figure.

(pause in recording)

DePue: Okay. We took a very quick break. What I want to ask you about then: I know you arrived in Vietnam with your unit on March 13th of 1965.

Nicklaus: No, we left San Diego on March 13, 1965. We actually arrived in Vietnam in June of '65.

DePue: June of '65. I want to get your first impressions of Vietnam when you landed. And did you fly in, or by ship?

Nicklaus: We climbed down the nets into a landing craft, circled until we were all loaded, and we hit the beach with the landing craft.

DePue: Did you think you were going to have a contested landing?

Nicklaus: We thought we would, but we were told we could load, but we had to keep our weapons locked, which we did not understand that at all.

DePue: In other words, the safeties were on.

Nicklaus: Yeah. But the magazine was… We had M14s the whole time we were there. Well, I'd take an M14 today anyway, but that's another story. We hit the beach, and we come charging off, just like you see on TV from World War II landings, except that there was no opposition. Matter of fact—I think I told you—there were kids walking up and down the beach—not hundreds of them, but a few—selling Coca-Cola, for heaven's sakes. "GI Coca-Cola?" So I'm thinking, what's this? You know, this ain't no war. Then they put us on six-bys and they took us to the Da Nang airfield; that's where we originally set up. Our first camp was at Da Nang. That was our first mission, the defense of the Da Nang airstrip.

DePue: When you say they put you on six-bys, did the six-bys also get delivered at the same time? Did they land with you?

Nicklaus: They were there. There were a few Marine companies that were there, and some of their equipment was there, so they already had some six-bys that were there at Da Nang.

DePue: Well, describe the geography, the weather, et cetera, for Da Nang. This is part of I[3] Corps.

Nicklaus: I Corps, absolutely.

[3] In the military, corps are identified with Roman numerals, hence, first corps.

DePue: It stands for First Corps, but it's in the northern part of South Vietnam.

Nicklaus: Yep, I Corps. The geography at the time that we saw was pretty flat, pretty sandy. Da Nang was a very old town. The air strip was very small. The Phantoms that landed on the airstrip actually landed on that airstrip the same way they land on a aircraft carrier. They had the ropes, whatever it was, stretched across the airstrip, and when they came in, that hook had to catch that in order to stop them in time. That's how small the runway was.

DePue: Were these Navy or Marine Phantoms?

Nicklaus: They were both, both.

DePue: Not Air Force, though?

Nicklaus: No, no, no. There we are at Da Nang, and we're not thinking… Matter of fact, we're sitting around one night, and a bunch of us guys were just jaw-jacking. We knew that the first sergeant had gotten a supply of beer and it was in his tent. So me and a guy by the name of Johnson—we called him Flintstone—we decided we'd go over there and we'd relieve the first sergeant of a few cases of his beer. So we did and we brought it back to the tent, and everybody was sitting there drinking beer. And like from our camp here, which was tents, to about where that empty lot is there—

DePue: Maybe a hundred feet away.

Nicklaus: A hundred yards, yeah. There was helicopters, UH or HU—UH-34s. Anyway, him and I decided we were going to go—

DePue: An earlier version of the helicopter, not the Hueys that we identify with later.

Nicklaus: No, no, no. I've got pictures of them here. We decided we was going to fly home. We had probably got inebriated. So we walked over to where the helicopters were and got in there, because they were open, and got into the pilot seat and copilot seat, just messing around. The next thing we know, here comes the MPs. Then the first sergeant gets involved, the company gunny gets involved, then we're standing tall before the CO[4] the next morning. Our reward for thinking we was going to fly a helicopter home was we got to dig four-holers for the whole company the next day.

DePue: Four-holers?

Nicklaus: Four-holers, about four of them.

DePue: Which is what?

[4] CO: Commanding Officer

Nicklaus: A place where you do your business. It's a deep hole, probably about six to eight feet deep, and it's got to be—oh goodness, I don't know…

DePue: I'm envisioning long enough so four people can sit at the same time.

Nicklaus: Well, it's a square. It's a square. Two on each side. So it's not four that way, it's two on each side. But it's a wide-open privy, I'll put it that way. How's that? So that was our reward.

DePue: When you said you were going to fly home, "home" being Camp Pendleton?

Nicklaus: Yeah, back to the United States in a helicopter. (laughter) Yeah, that's how much we knew about helicopters.

DePue: Well, that sounds like maybe you were more than just a little bit drunk.

Nicklaus: Yeah, probably were, probably were. (laughter) But then reality started setting in, because one night we heard explosions, and we all grabbed our helmets and rifles and hit the trench that we had along the airstrip. Some Vietcong with satchel charges had broken through where the Air Force was guarding the strip and threw satchel charges at the airstrip and some of the planes. I don't know if they ever killed them or not. We didn't actually see them, but we certainly knew that then this wasn't quite as a cakewalk as we thought it was going to be. Then also, shortly after that, one of them F-4 Phantoms come in, and I don't know what happened, but he crashed his plane, and we were standing there. He crashed it right in front of us at the end of the airstrip, and the pilot and the copilot were both killed.

But mainly while I was at Da Nang, we just did patrols, like squad- or platoon-sized patrols out in… You know, you'd go out so far from the airstrip. We called it Dogpatch, area called Dogpatch, and you'd go out maybe a thousand meters and then come back. I don't remember ever really running into anything during any of them patrols.

DePue: What did you know about the enemy, who the enemy was, even?

Nicklaus: Well, we knew that there was probably as many Vietcong as there was NVA [North Vietnamese Army]. We knew that you couldn't trust any of the young men, or any of the men, and then we started hearing stories about kids and women. So pretty soon we got to suspect that our enemy was just about anybody in Vietnam anywhere. It wasn't certainly the old, "Here's the line of defense, and on that side is the enemy, and on this side is the good guys." That wasn't in Vietnam, never was.

DePue: Were you supporting South Vietnamese military units?

Nicklaus: We had some ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] attached to us.

DePue: Even early on?

Nicklaus: Early on. But we never supported a company, a battalion, or anything like that, no. But we had ARVNs attached to us. They were attached to us for probably two reasons: number one, interrogation, to interrogate the POWs we took. And then I suppose they were there to try to learn for us. We were real impressed with the ARVN.

DePue: Your understanding of who the enemy was—working with the ARVN forces that you had there—what did all of this lead to in terms of your thinking about, Why are we here, what's this all about?

Nicklaus: Well, again, we felt that it was all about preserving this country: for whatever reason, preserving this country's democracy, the reason being because our country said we should preserve their democracy. Our country said they wanted them to remain a free country, and that was our job. I think—at least I know I did—I thought in the back of my mind, If we don't preserve their democracy, then that's going to be a threat to our country.

DePue: Did you understand that North Vietnam was a communist country and that they were trying to establish communist control over the entire country?

Nicklaus: Very much so, yeah. We knew that. That's exactly what they wanted to do, yeah. We knew it was a little Korea all over again.

DePue: Okay. What happened, then, after this duty that you were on the airstrip in Da Nang?

Nicklaus: Well, then we moved out, and I think we went to an ammo dump. We were there for a while. Then 9th Marines established their headquarters at a place called Marble Mountain, and all three battalions and the 9th Marines then converged on Marble Mountain to set up our area. Then our platoon moved south of Marble Mountain to an old French fort, and we spent a lot of time out at that French fort. (pause)

We ran patrols and whatnot out of the French fort; first we had one patrol. It was a company-sized patrol, and I remember the firing started, and the next thing I know, we had two casualties—first two casualties that I can remember our platoon having. It was Pate and Hunter. Pate got shot in the foot, and Hunter got shot in the gut. I was trying to call in Medevac; I had to do it through the company radioman, and I couldn't reach him. I changed the battery in the PRC-10, and I still couldn't reach him. Well, come to find out, they were not where they were supposed to be; they were too far south, so therefore, they were out of range. Then I just called Medevac straight from my

radio, and we got them guys Medevaced out of there. That was the first WIAs[5] that I can remember from our platoon.

I think I remember going on another company sweep. We marched all night, and I think it might have been even a modified battalion sweep. We were supposed to be the rear guard, and boy, all hell broke loose. But it was mainly to our left, so our platoon didn't absorb too much of the firing, but I know that my brother lost two of his men in his fire team. A fire team in the Marine Corps were four men teams: fire team leader and automatic weapon and two riflemen. And he lost two of his men.

We got through that, and then on September ninth—it seemed to me from my recollection—we were on a patrol in the morning, and then we came back to the French fort, and there was a report of NVA activity south of the French fort in Tra-Khe or something like that, Tra-Khe and Cau Ha. So here again, I think we went on a modified battalion march to sweep down there. And boy, we got down there, and you talk about everything breaking loose. We started receiving all kind of mortars. We were on kind of a dike, and then there was a rice paddy, and the NVA was over here. So myself and platoon commander and the corpsman, we were always together when we were walking on a patrol or something. I remember Pete said, "Let's go," and I remember we went up to where—I think—our third squad was. To the right was first squad, and they were receiving almost direct mortar hits. And then the mortars—

DePue: Had your unit basically walked into an ambush, then?

Nicklaus: Oh, yeah, yeah. I don't know if it was necessarily an ambush, but we didn't see them and they saw us. We weren't trying to sneak up on anybody; we had tanks with us, we had Ontos with us.

DePue: Had what with you?

Nicklaus: Ontos.

DePue: Ontos?

Nicklaus: Yeah. You know what Ontos is?

DePue: No.

Nicklaus: Ontos is a small-looking armored vehicle that's got three 106s on each side, 106 recoilless rifle. You've never seen one?

DePue: No.

[5] WIA: Wounded In Action

Nicklaus: Didn't know they existed?

DePue: You're teaching me something here.

Nicklaus: Yeah. Well, we had them. The only problem with it is you had to get out of the armored part of the vehicle to put the shell into the 106s. But they were a pretty nice little thing to have. And, like I say, we had tanks. We were up there, and Pete said, "Get a hold of the company and tell them we need some support." So I did, and then they said, "Well, what kind of support do you want?" I said, "I don't care. Send us tanks, send us Ontos—send us something."

Well then I guess he took the radio receiver from me, and he called in naval gun support from ships off the coast of Vietnam, and gave them the grid coordinates, and they started firing. That quieted down the NVAs firing.

We pulled back a little bit, and we took a head count; we were missing people, so we went back in, and that's when we found Mahler, who was dead. No, actually, he sent in two guys to bring the dead out, and they came back—Majors and I can't remember who the other one is—but they came back and said, "We can't bring them out." Well, once we went in and saw what they saw, we understood, because Lance Corporal Mahler's body was practically blown—the left portion of his trunk, his left leg was completely gone. He must have taken almost a direct hit from a mortar. His squad leader, next to him, Boonstra, his left leg was completely gone. We put Boonstra on the lieutenant's back; I held him on his back, and we actually crawled to a helicopter to put him on the helicopter to evacuate him out of there.

DePue: He was still alive?

Nicklaus: He's still alive today, yeah. He doesn't have a leg—missing his left leg. He came to one of our reunions. Then we found Boyer laying in a burning hut or just a bunch of debris that was burning, but his body was smoldering. The only way we could get him out of there was we tied a rope around his leg and drug him our of there. So we had Mahler and Boyer that we took to the helicopters. We wanted them to take our dead out, and they said, "No, we can't put them on the helicopter." Well, we almost shot them, but we didn't. They wouldn't take Boyer because of the smoldering body, and they wouldn't take Mahler because his body was oozing too much stuff, they said. Well, to make a long story short, we put them on tanks. The tankers said they'd take them. So the tankers took them back for us.

There was all kind of carnage that day. There was an Ontos driver who lost both his arms. He was just hanging out of the top of the Ontos, and both arms from about here were gone. I know that we had an observer from another unit that was with us, and his hand was just a shred. I don't know what hit him. But everywhere you looked there was just death and people wounded. It

was just a bad day. And then it started pouring down rain, pouring like crazy, like it does in Vietnam. You know, it gets real crazy.

DePue: Had you even seen the enemy?

Nicklaus: Yeah, after a while. Matter of fact, one of our squad leaders saw about six or eight men in uniform going across the dike. He thought they were more Marines, and he thought that we were finally going to go on the offensive and go after these guys. Well, then he noticed they were wearing pith helmets, so he knew they weren't Marines, they were NVA. So he loaded up his M79 and was going to start to fire a round at them, but by the time he got his 79 loaded and looked back up, they were already disappeared. Reports were that from villagers and from air observation, they said we killed 127 NVA and yadda yadda. Never prove it by me.

DePue: You don't believe that.

Nicklaus: Oh, with the naval gunfire and our firing and whatnot, I'm sure we killed a lot of them. I don't have any doubt that we might have killed 127 of them, I'm just saying that I never saw the 127 that we killed.

DePue: Did you personally ever see any NVA?

Nicklaus: I lifted my head among the flying bullets and started firing back. I can't honestly say I actually saw them over there. I knew the direction I was firing in, but that day I can't actually say I saw them.

DePue: You got a PRC-10 strapped to your back, I assume.

Nicklaus: Yeah, I got a PRC-10 strapped to my back with a whip antenna, yep.

DePue: Doesn't that make you a target?

Nicklaus: (simultaneously) I'm a big target. Yeah. Yeah, it does make you a target. But, you know, I wasn't the only one; each platoon had one, so. You got to do what you got to do.

DePue: How big an NVA force did you hear that was involved with this?

Nicklaus: A battalion. A battalion of NVA. I remember when we was done and we was walking back to the French fort, we were all sopping wet, and the lieutenant looked at me—apparently he was so wrapped up in what was going on—and he said, "Did it rain today?" And I said, "Yeah, it poured today." And he wasn't even aware of why he was wet.

DePue: This is the lieutenant that had been walking with you, had been with you the whole time?

Nicklaus: My platoon commander, yeah. He's my platoon commander.

DePue: What's his name?

Nicklaus: His name? His name was 1st Lieutenant Pete Laqueur.

DePue: Okay. You mentioned him before, then. Was he a career Marine?

Nicklaus: No, no. I don't know when he got out, but he certainly was not a career Marine, no.

DePue: Well, what you just described certainly wasn't a typical action. Can you describe for us what a typical patrol might be like for you?

Nicklaus: Well, most the time we would go out for like three to four days, make sure we all took enough rations and water and whatnot, because we weren't going to be resupplied while we were out on patrol. We would start out of the fort, and we would probably go south along the sand dunes, and then we would turn west and get into the pine trees and so forth. Not very often did we get into the mountains or the dense jungles. I would say the majority of our patrolling was done in the dunes or the pine—there are a lot of pine trees. Some of it was done in the jungles—not a great deal. That's where we came in contact with Agent Orange.

Our patrols would go through villages. I can remember one time we went through a village and took fire; we hit the deck, and there was mortars coming in. Once it stopped, then we started making sure everybody in our platoon was okay, and then we started checking on the villagers. I remember this old woman—she must have been eighty years old, or if she wasn't, she very sure looked like it—and she had her arm blown off, and just sitting there. Just sitting there with her arm blown off.

You could never trust these people, either, because another time we were going through a village. I'm sure you've been described villages before. This isn't a village like Rock Falls or Sterling or something, you know, where you got houses and businesses. There's no business in these places, just thatched huts and stinking fish and rice and flies all over the place and people in black pajamas and black teeth from their beechnut, openly nursing their children. The people we come in contact with were very, very backward, still living, it looked like, in the conditions they were probably living in, I don't know, 1500s, probably, if not before. They still did everything out in the rice paddies with an ox and some type of wooden plow or something. Just completely—no sanitation, no nothing.

DePue: In the last few wars we've had, there's always been a lot of talk about specific rules of engagement, and when you were allowed to fire (Nicklaus laughs) and when you weren't. What were you instructed?

Nicklaus: I don't remember actually having any specific rules of engagement spelled out to us. What I started to say was, one time we was going through a village and there was this woman standing there with a little kid in front of her; we were thinking not a whole lot of it. Then the next thing we see is she pushes the kid aside and she's standing there with a—I don't know where she got it, probably American—Thompson submachine gun. So we blow her away. And this is where this crap back here comes from where we're woman-killers and baby-killers and stuff like that. And that just wasn't true. It still isn't true to this day. It ticks me off that people would even conceive such an idea—at least when we were there in '65 and '66. But the rules of engagement? I don't remember Pete ever telling me, "If somebody shoots at you, shoot back at them." It's pretty simple.

DePue: Now, obviously, they're going to shoot at you; they don't want to be seen, so you get some fire from a hut that's maybe fifty yards away.

Nicklaus: Oh, we got sniped at constantly. I remember one time we was on a patrol and heard some shots, and the next thing I know, somebody's yelling "Corpsman up." Doc goes running up there, and of course Pete goes running up and I go running up. Lance Corporal Mulneaux got hit with a sniper round and it took his whole jaw right off. He's just sitting there holding his jaw. Yeah, it was just amazing.

I remember one time I was running across the dike. In fact, the whole platoon had gone across and hadn't received any fire at all. Then I go running across with that stupid radio on my back and a couple rounds come dinging at me. I jump off of that dike, jumped in the rice paddy. I'll finish getting across this way. And I did. I finished going across in the rice paddy instead of on the dike. But most of the time, their snipers were very ineffective, very poor shots. Harassment more than anything.

DePue: What was your attitude when you went out on these patrols, that there would be a day when your number would be up as well?

Nicklaus: Well, I think you always had in the back of your mind that, yeah… But then again, you know, I think that I always felt that I would come back. I can't remember ever having a moment where I thought, I won't be back. I guess we just never thought about it; I just never let it enter my mind. I just felt that I'll go on this patrol and I'll come back, and we'll all be okay. Fortunately, for me it was okay. It wasn't okay—we had more casualties, more KIAs.[6]

Pete got it. Pete got wounded the same day Guerin got killed, so. That was another patrol.

DePue: I'm surprised you're referring to him as "Pete" instead of "lieutenant." Was it pretty informal in that respect?

[6] KIA: Killed In Action

Nicklaus: Oh, no. Back then it was "lieutenant" or "sir." Fifty-five years later, or forty-five years later, or whatever it is, it's Pete.

DePue: How about your brother? Now that you're in the midst of action and you say this is serious business, your brother's still in the adjacent platoon?

Nicklaus: No. No. We've skipped over that part, I guess.

DePue: Okay, let's talk about that.

Nicklaus: Prior to September 9th, they decided that they were going to rotate individuals rather than whole units. Their theory was that that way they would always have veterans along with new people coming in, and new people would come in but they'd have veterans there as well.

DePue: "They" being—

Nicklaus: The higher-up.

DePue: —the policymakers back in the States someplace.

Nicklaus: Yeah, yeah, the higher-ups. Yeah. Way above my level, certainly. Probably division-level, maybe even Pentagon, I don't know. So they came to us and said, "Second platoon, you're going to go away. Second platoon, you're going to go to 3rd Marine Regiment. Do you want to go with 2nd Platoon"—they're saying this to Ted—"or do you want to stay here and go to 1st Platoon and stay with your brother?" So we talked about it and we said, No, we're going to separate. So we separated. His platoon was on that sweep on September 9th. They were on our left flank. I don't think they received the fire we did. I think there was some NVA up in trees that were sniping at them, but I don't think they took any—I don't even know if they took casualties. I guess I don't know. But I do know that had he changed his mind or had we said, Yeah, he wants to stay in 1st Platoon, he would have been in that squad that got hit, you know, where r Boyer got killed and Boonstra lost his leg. He would have been in that platoon, or that squad, I mean. So thankful that we made the decision we did. After that, they transferred 2nd Platoon to 3rd Marine Regiment, and he went over there, and actually, he became the battalion commander's driver.

DePue: This is still in Vietnam, though?

Nicklaus: Yeah, mm-hmm. But then, for some reason, they got to go back to Okinawa at Christmastime. I don't know why. They got on a ship and went back, and then they came back after Christmas was over.

DePue: They went back as a unit?

Nicklaus: Mm-hmm.

DePue: When you say they came back after Christmas, did they come back to Vietnam?

Nicklaus: Yep. Don't ask me why.

DePue: Well, they got an R&R maybe.

Nicklaus: Yeah, people were going on R&R, but they were going as individuals, not as a whole unit. One of them decisions again that was far superior to my rank.

DePue: What was your rank at the time?

Nicklaus: Lance corporal, E-3.

DePue: They don't ask lance corporals what their opinion is.

Nicklaus: (laughs) No, they sure don't. No.

DePue: It sounds like you were in plenty of situations where it was pretty darn tense; certainly this action on September ninth was one of them. What's going through your mind, especially the first couple times you get into something serious like that. What are the emotions that you're experiencing?

Nicklaus: Oh, I think your adrenaline is running itself, and your heart's beating so fast and adrenaline's pumping, and you're scared. You're scared. Anyone that says they ain't scared is lying, I'll tell you that. If you can hide behind a leaf, you'll hide behind a leaf, you know, anything you can find. As silly as it sounds, you think if that's all I can find, maybe that'll stop the bullet. So you're scared, your adrenaline's running, your heart's pumping, you're sweating, but yet you got to continue to do what you got to do. When he says, "Call the company," you get on the radio and you make the call.

DePue: Is it better to have something to do in those moments?

Nicklaus: I think so. I think so. Well, everybody has something to do because you're supposed to be, you know, returning fire.

DePue: If you know where the enemy is.

Nicklaus: Yeah. Well, we knew where the fire was coming from. We knew it was coming from across the rice paddy. You always hear the Marines storming this or storming that, and I often wondered why we didn't storm across that rice paddy. But I think it would have been just complete suicide had we done that.

DePue: What are the emotions then when you see your buddies getting injured, especially some of these serious injuries you described?

Nicklaus: (pause) Well, melancholy, obviously. These guys that you served with for a long time, nineteen years old, and they're dead. They stick with you for eternity, for your whole life. Mahler's always been in my mind, Boyer's always been in my mind, Guerin, Neumeier. Young guys that just never got to see life, experience the things that I've got to experience.

DePue: Did the unit start receiving replacements, then, when you were taking these casualties?

Nicklaus: The unit did, but there again, our platoon pretty much stayed intact. We started receiving replacements for the casualties we suffered.

DePue: Your unit was one of the first in, and you're roughly there, what, twelve, thirteen months?

Nicklaus: Ten, about ten.

DePue: Did you notice any change in the intensity of the action that you had?

Nicklaus: Yeah, I think the longer we were there the more intense—the more frequently we ran into op forces, and the more—oh, what do I want to say?—the more we ran into them, the more professional they were becoming. They were getting better at what they were doing, unfortunately. But we did, too. We got better, too. You know, we learned to look for their booby traps, their tripwires, when we was on patrol. And we found a lot of them. We didn't find them all. That's what killed Guerin. Guerin hit a tripwire, set off a booby trap and it killed him on a patrol. But we got pretty good. We were good. We were very good. Our platoon was very good.

DePue: Was it more and more NVA units that you're encountering versus Vietcong?

Nicklaus: I think when we were there in '65, '66, other than that one time, most the time we encountered organized Vietcong more than NVA.

DePue: What did you think about your enemy you faced, either Vietcong or NVA?

Nicklaus: Cowardly.

DePue: Cowardly?

Nicklaus: Uh-huh. Cowardly. You know, if you want to fight us, you can come out and fight us. Don't sit there and snipe at us. Of course, if it was my country, I would probably do they same thing they were doing. But I felt that, yeah, if you guys want to fight, then… Of course, I'm still thinking back to the previous wars when you stood up and you stood on line and you knew where your enemy was, you fired at them. But even I guess in the islands in the Pacific, the Marines didn't know where the Japanese were a lot of times either. But my opinion of the Vietcong and the NVA: they were our enemy

and I didn't like them. I don't trust them. I didn't trust them, but I still don't trust them.

DePue: It seems to me in what you were doing, most of the time., you'd go out on patrol—either platoon or company or maybe occasionally a larger-level patrol—but you're always waiting for the bad guys to initiate the action.

Nicklaus: Well, that's what our patrolling was for, was to see where the bad guys were.

DePue: So in other words, you guys get to be the bait?

Nicklaus: Well, you'd go on recon[7] patrols. You'd recon the area and see if they were out there, and if they were, you would engage them. Or if the force was too strong, you'd observe them hopefully, and not engage them, and then report back the intel to Company, and then they'd send it all up.

DePue: Did you ever go out and set up ambushes?

Nicklaus: We went on one patrol one time where we might set up a night ambush, but we didn't see anything. Other than that, I can't remember setting up an ambush, no.

DePue: Did you ever go out and you knew exactly where the enemy was, and you were going to be on the offensive?

Nicklaus: No, no. I can never say that, no.

DePue: What did you think, then, walking through these villages that you described before, and not knowing?

Nicklaus: I didn't like walking through the villages. I didn't trust walking through the villages. I thought, even the women and the kids that were in the villages—I'm sure they were just victims of the environment. But still, you know, the war was dictating what we felt they were capable of, and we knew that they were capable of pulling from some sort of a gun or setting off a booby trap or anything. So a lot of distrust, and very cautious, very cautious going through these villages, even though part of the American mission was—as it seemed like, every war we get into anymore—to befriend the people.

DePue: The phrase is "winning hearts and minds" of the people.

Nicklaus: Yeah, there you go. Thank you. Yeah, yeah, that's what we were supposed to do, win their hearts and minds.

DePue: Did anybody explicitly say, this is what you're supposed to do to?

[7] Recon: reconnaissance

Nicklaus: Well, yeah, they did in a way. Some of the kids, we'd give them candy bars or chocolate from our C-Rations or whatnot. You know, they'd be climbing all over you and thanking you. But you didn't do it too often because then they'd never leave you alone.

I know we went through a leper colony one time. That was an experience. I'd never seen a leper before and here's a whole colony of them. It was out in the middle of nowhere, out in the middle of the desert. It was just unbelievable. It was strange because they would all come and encircle you and touch you, and I don't want you people touching me. But after you got to be around a little bit, then they weren't too bad. Strange, strange, strange.

DePue: I would imagine you go on these extended patrols—three- or four-day patrols—when you're awake your senses have to be at a heightened state all the time, don't they?

Nicklaus: Oh, absolutely. Yeah, we didn't let our guard down. We knew that we were tired. You were either soaking wet from sweat or soaking wet from rain over there most the time. It was either very hot or it was just pouring down rain. So you were miserable as far as the conditions were, but you knew that you had to stay on top of your game all the time.

DePue: Well, let's talk about what happened, then, when you came back to base camp. I guess you were at a base camp someplace?

Nicklaus: Well, yeah. When we finally got out of the French fort, we finally came back to Marble Mountain for a little rest. And (laughs) they had an NCO club, enlisted club—set up a tent with a wood floor in it, you know—at Marble Mountain. I remember we come back—we had been gone for quite awhile, because that wasn't even there when we were first there—some went in there, we got to drinking. Then I was outside, and I was coming back in, and I hit a—they had a fifty-gallon drum, oil drum, cut in half, and it was laying on the ground full of water—I hit it with my leg, and it put a hole in my leg. I still got the scar today. To make a long story short, it put me into the field hospital at Marble Mountain. Cellulitis had set in, infection. Well, this must have been around, I don't know, Christmastime, I guess. Bob Hope was at Da Nang. They were going to take some six-bys from Marble Mountain and take a bunch of the guys back to Da Nang so they could see Bob Hope, and I couldn't go because I was in this field hospital. So I never saw Bob Hope. Story of my life.

DePue: Sounds like you're disappointed about that one.

Nicklaus: Yeah, yeah. Well, it's just like going on R&R. They said, "Okay, Nicklaus, you and four other guys"—we was out in the boonies when this happened—they said, "Pack your gear; you're going to go on R&R." I said, "Okay." So I think there were six of us, and the helicopter landed and says, "Oh, we only

got room for four." Four? So I don't know if we picked straws or what we did, but me and the other guy, we lost, and we stayed back. I never did do R&R. I never went to R&R. Everybody else talks about going to Bangkok or going to the Philippines or going to Australia. Naw, I didn't go on R&R. (laughs) Saved a lot of money, I guess.

DePue: Was Ted married at the time?

Nicklaus: No, not in Vietnam.

DePue: Well, tell me about keeping in touch with Carol, with your wife. How did you manage to do that?

Nicklaus: Just letters. That was the only form of communication back then, was letters. Certainly made no phone calls or anything like that; there were no phones. I can remember one time I had to write and tell her that I lost my wedding ring. We were out in the boonies somewhere, and our way of getting clean was to find a mud hole somewhere that had water in it, and we'd wash our face and hands with that water. The ring slipped off my finger into this mud hole. I walked back up there and I said, "Hey, doc, come here." I said, "You got to help me find my ring." I'd already wrote a letter and told her I'd lost it. So then we went down there and we started looking, and we couldn't find it. At last, out of frustration, I just reached down there and grabbed a bunch of mud and went to throw it down in the puddle, and there was something silver, and there was my ring. So I found it. So then I had to write and tell her I found it again, so. But it was just letters. Mail call was the salvation of the war. Mail call. That was the best part of the day.

DePue: Well, paint us a picture of mail call then.

Nicklaus: Oh, you just hoped and prayed you got a letter every day from somebody. You know, it didn't really make any difference who it was, just as long as you got some communications from somebody. Of course, most the time I'm sure I hoped it was from her. But Dad would write, Mom would write—Mom wrote certainly more than Dad did—my sister would write. But just to get a letter from home, from anybody from home.

DePue: Who was delivering the mail?

Nicklaus: They brought them out usually by helicopter. They'd bring it to the Company, then the Company would send it out to us by truck or something. We didn't get them when we was out on patrol or anything, just from when we was at our—I think we call them PPB something, patrol base…

DePue: How often were you writing home?

Nicklaus: One time I got called in to the company commander and he says, "We got a letter from the Red Cross. Your mom says that you're not writing home as

often as you should." And I said, "Oh my gosh." You know how mothers can be. So I said, "Okay, I'll write her a letter." So I wrote her a letter. But you just don't have a whole lot of time. I don't know if Carol's still got the letters I wrote her or not, but I'd write when I could. I didn't write long letters.

DePue: What kind of things did you include in the letters, and what kind of things did you not include?

Nicklaus: Hm. Oh, I think one thing that really upset me was I wrote Carol a letter about September 9th and explained briefly what happened and what I experienced. It was just supposed to be for her only, and the next thing I know she's sending me a copy of the letter that was in the newspaper. And that upset me quite a bit. That wasn't for publication. So then after that—

DePue: Did it explain some of the more graphic details ?

Nicklaus: Pretty much. I don't know about the real graphic, but, you know, I think I mentioned we ran into a whole bunch of stuff and Boonstra got loss of leg and Boyer got killed and so forth. So after that, I don't think I hardly ever wrote about any experiences over there because I didn't want a repeat of that.

DePue: Did it wear on you that, as you're there, you're going on these patrols, in the platoon or company you're losing one or two or several at a time? Over time, the ranks get a lot thinner, I would think.

Nicklaus: Yeah. You know, it got kind of strange sometimes because, you're right, the casualties came in one and twos. You know, Guerin trips a tripwire, the booby trap kills him. Shrapnel hits the lieutenant, so he gets evacuated. Another sweep, Edwards gets hit in the leg and evacuated him out. Mulneaux got the jaw shot off; they medevaced him out. And you're right, it was, you know, ones and twos, ones and twos. And it just got to the point where every time when we went on a patrol or a sweep of some sort, we pretty much expected that we was going to have some, hopefully not KIAs, probably WIAs, and it just about turned out we did.

DePue: Were you getting replacements one and two at a time as well?

Nicklaus: One and two at a time, yeah.

DePue: What was the attitude of the old timers towards the replacements that were coming in?

Nicklaus: (laughs) Sit there and do what you're told and—what's the old saying? Be seen and not heard? I don't think it was that bad. We tried to accept them, and we did accept them after they'd been out on a few patrols and got a little experience. If they were a loudmouth when they come in, thought they were going to fight the whole war by themselves, we certainly straightened them

out in a hurry by informing them they weren't going to win the whole war by themselves; they'd do what they were told, and that's it, you know.

DePue: Did you feel different about the guys you'd shipped over with than the ones who were coming in?

Nicklaus: Oh, absolutely. Yeah, yeah.

DePue: How so?

Nicklaus: Oh, the guys I shipped over with were near and dear to my heart and friends of mine and whatnot, and the replacements were fellow Marines, and they'll always be Marines, but personally they didn't mean as much to me as the guys we shipped over with.

DePue: Do you think that was kind of a conscious thing, that you didn't want to get as close to them?

Nicklaus: Probably. That's a good point, because after a while you become pretty callous and you don't want to make friends. You really don't want to make friends. I think I've even carried that through my whole life. Even when I come back from Nam, I don't want to really get—I have friends, but they're few. The reason is because you lose so many friends and it hurts so much that pretty soon you just decide that you're better off not getting close to anybody. That way you put up this defense mechanism. If you're not close to them and you lose them, then it's not going to hurt so much.

DePue: Did you get any medals, awards?

Nicklaus: Just the regular Vietnam Service Award. I didn't get any personal awards, no.

Didn't get a Purple Heart, thank God.

DePue: You did not, you say?

Nicklaus: No.

DePue: So this injury you got with the fifty-five-gallon barrel drum, you didn't get a Purple Heart?

Nicklaus: You know, that's funny because the corpsman says, "Hey, I'll put you in for a Purple Heart." I said, "You ain't going to put me in for a Purple Heart for that." "Yeah," he said, "you deserve one anyway." I said, "I don't deserve a Purple Heart and don't want a Purple Heart." So I told him, "No, don't put me in for a Purple Heart."

DePue: Did you know people who got Purple Hearts and hadn't earned them the right way?

Nicklaus: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. We had one six-by that they claim it hit a land mine, and they were all complaining about their ears hurting and whatnot, and the next thing I know we're having a little formation and they're all getting Purple Hearts, all six of them. That was kind of hokey-pokey. I remember we had a guy by the name of Winters, Staff Sergeant Winters. He came aboard, and I think it was the day that Edwards got shot; something happened to Winters, and he wanted to know if he could get a Purple Heart for that. So I looked at the lieutenant. You know, when someone gets wounded, you call in their name and their service number. The service numbers were different than your Social Security numbers back then. You had your own service number. So you called in the name—you didn't say the name—just the first initial of the last name and the service number. So I looked at him, and he shook his head no. He said, "Don't call in a Purple Heart for Winters." So Winters was really disappointed that he didn't get his Purple Heart. Well, come to find out, after I had left, they were on a sweep or something, and Winters got his Purple Heart, because he got killed. So he finally got what he wanted. You know the old saying, be careful what you ask for?

DePue: You mentioned that you're calling in people's names over the radio and their service numbers. Did you have to go secure when you did that, or would you not worry about the enemy listening in on radio traffic?

Nicklaus: There was no way to go secure. That's why you just did the first initial of the last name and the service number. They ain't going to know… All of our communications from a platoon level was certainly not over a secure site. I can remember one time we were in, I think it was a defense of an ammo dump, and three guys from the 2nd Platoon—this is before Ted got transferred—three guys from 2nd Platoon were inside this like a pagoda, and a sapper come through, and he threw a couple grenades in there and killed Neumeier and wounded the other two guys. Well, Neumeier's tour is open end, and he was in 2nd Platoon. So I'm listening to the transmission from the 2nd Platoon radioman to the Company about their casualties. You know, he starts listing, and he starts sending it over the radio; he gives the first initial, the last name, and the service number. Well, then he said November, and I'm thinking, Oh, crap, *N*, Nicklaus, because Ted was still in the second platoon. But then he gave the serial number, and I knew it wasn't his serial number.

DePue: His service number.

Nicklaus: Service number, yeah. But I was sorry to hear that Neumeier got killed, but that was stupid; that was really stupid.

DePue: This is during the time that, not too many years before this, that the military had integrated. What are your impressions of how well the Marines had integrated?

Nicklaus: With the blacks, you mean?

DePue: Yes.

Nicklaus: Our first two casualties that I mentioned way back in the beginning, our first two WIAs, Hunter and Pate, were both black soldiers. Thought the world of Hunter. Pate was kind of a loudmouth regardless of what his color was. But I think the integration was no problem in our platoon at all. We had Hispanics, we had whites, we had Indians, we had blacks, but what it boiled down to was we were all green, just Marines. So we had no problem with that at all.

DePue: Later on in the war—this would have been quite a bit later—'68, '69, '70, '71—you hear a lot about the morale and discipline problems and drug and alcohol problems. Did you have any experiences with any of that?

Nicklaus: I can sit here and honestly tell you that during my whole time in Vietnam, I never once was offered, never once saw anyone —myself or any of the Marines that I served with—take any drugs whatsoever. None. Not a one.

DePue: How available was alcohol when you were off patrol.

Nicklaus: Well, (laughs) alcohol was almost nonexistent. Once in a while a helicopter would land and drop off a few cases of beer, we'd open it up, and you know what it'd be? It'd be Schlitz cans. They were even rusty, is how old they were. When we first got over there, some of the C-Ration boxes had dates on them, 1945. Yeah. That's what C-Rations we were eating. You had B-1s, B-2s, and B-3s, C-Rations. Did you ever eat C-Rations?

DePue: Oh, yes, but I'm not familiar with B ones, twos, and threes.

Nicklaus: Yeah, B-1s had, I don't know, like a pound cake or something. I might have them mixed up. B-2 might have had a chocolate bar or something in it, and B-3 had fruit. Whichever one had the fruit in it, that was the one everybody wanted, the B-3 or B-1 or whatever.

DePue: What was your favorite C-Ration meal?

Nicklaus: "Favorite"? I don't know if I had a favorite. Boy, I don't know. Beef stew, I guess, probably.

DePue: And your least favorite?

Nicklaus: The lima beans and eggs, whatever it was. But I'll tell you what we did do. We got pretty innovative. We'd take these cans of C-Rations, and we had acquired a big old pot. Whenever time allowed, we would just pour these contents of these C-Rations in this pot and stir it up and just have a big old Mulligan stew made out of all different kinds of C-Rats. Whatever everybody happened to have, that just went in the pot, and that's what we ate.

DePue: When you got to base camp, did you get to eat some hot meals once in a while?

Nicklaus: Yeah. Well, not at the base camp, but when we got back to Marble Mountain we'd get hot meals. We'd go a long time without a hot meal sometimes, and a lot of time you couldn't even have time to eat your MREs[8] or your C-Rations. I don't know if you're familiar with heat tablets? That's what we used whenever we had the time to heat our C-Rations. But one of the best things about C-Rations was they came in cans, and so when you emptied the can, then you had a drinking utensil. You put water in it and you can make coffee or tea or something. Can't do that with MREs.

DePue: Yeah. What kind of cigarettes did you get with those C-Rations?

Nicklaus: You got Camels, you got Pall Malls, you got Winstons. I don't think Marlboro. I don't remember Marlboro. I remember Winstons, Pall Malls, Camels, Lucky Strikes. Them four I remember.

DePue: Did you smoke?

Nicklaus: Oh, we smoked the heck out of them. Did I smoke at that time?

DePue: Yeah.

Nicklaus: Yeah, I sure did. Yeah. And I loved the guys who didn't.

DePue: What percent of the guys didn't?

Nicklaus: Doc didn't, our corpsman. Doc Bell, my buddy Doc Bell. He didn't smoke, so he'd give me his cigarettes out of the C-Rations.

DePue: He didn't trade for them; he just gave them to you?

Nicklaus: Oh, yeah. Doc wouldn't trade. I'd give him something once in a while. And then the wife would send cartons of cigarettes over a lot of times. We always had our cigarettes.

DePue: Tell me about getting cleaned up. Like, maybe how often did you get a shower?

Nicklaus: Boy, I'll tell you. One time we went up into the hills, and there was a stream coming down and kind of like a little, real miniature waterfall. We took a shower in that one time. A regular shower? Probably whenever we went back to Marble Mountain is all, and that wasn't very often. So, like I said, we'd clean up in waterholes, and our drinking water a lot of time came out of the

[8] MREs: Meals Ready to Eat followed the older C-rations. They were packed in heavy plastic and came in a variety of menus. They seemed to be more acceptable than the old C-Rats. In fact, the Red Cross often distributes them in disaster situations where they are much appreciated.

same water holes because they couldn't get us water cans. We'd be on three- or four-day patrols. You aren't going to carry five-gallon water cans full of water—they'd be awful heavy—so you'd just put a halazone tablet in your canteen—they had metal canteens then—fill your canteen up with whatever you could find and put a halazone tablet in it and away you go.

DePue: Were you expected to shave every day?

Nicklaus: Yeah, when time permitted, you were expected to keep shaved. I don't remember NBC being a big issue over there.

DePue: NBC?

Nicklaus: Nuclear, biological, or chemical. Matter of fact, I can't even remember if we carried our gas masks.

DePue: I know that's one of the least popular things for soldiers to have strapped on their leg.

Nicklaus: Oh, absolutely, until you need it. But I don't remember even carrying them. And the correlation there is, of course, you know, you got to keep clean shaven to wear a gas mask. But I don't remember that being an issue. But I know that if we were gone for two or three days on our patrols, we didn't shave while we was out on patrol. We didn't shave till we got back.

DePue: Well, I know that it's a problem especially if your feet are constantly wet. Changing socks out—were you able to do that? Were you able to change your uniforms once in a while?

Nicklaus: Not uniforms, but we certainly, or I certainly carried extra socks with me, and I would change socks as often as I could, and tie the wet ones to the back of my pack if it was a sunny day so they'd dry. If it was a wet day, it didn't make any difference because the ones I was wearing were going to be as wet as the ones on the back of my pack anyway. So we did a lot of walking through rice paddies and whatnot, and that's why these jungle boots had them little holes in the bottom, supposedly to drain the water out.

DePue: Did you have the canvas style of jungle boots?

Nicklaus: Unhuh. That was a great innovation. But at least they tried. The best thing they gave us was the steel sole inserts for the boots.

DePue: What you've described so far sounds like a pretty miserable existence.

Nicklaus: As a whole, probably, I think it was. There was nothing modern about the existence. If you had a tent to sleep in or even just a tent over your head, a lean-to, just putting a poncho, you know, and four poles, and sleeping underneath it, that was a luxury.

DePue: When you're on these four-day patrols, you'd just plop down someplace and sleep?

Nicklaus: Well, at nighttime you'd dig a hole so that if you received fire—because a lot of times they'd know where you were and you wouldn't know where they were. So we'd usually dig a hole and sleep in the hole. You didn't have a sleeping bag. You didn't carry a sleeping bag with you.

DePue: I'm assuming you get to pull your shift once in a while, too.

Nicklaus: Well, you know, we'd always set up a 360 [perimeter], and of course the line squads took care of the 360, and then we took turns on the radio, monitoring the radio.

DePue: Of all these things that you experienced, then, what would you think was the worst part of the service?

Nicklaus: In Vietnam?

DePue: Yeah.

Nicklaus: The worst part. (pause) You know, of all the misery that we went through over there and all the hard times and all the experiences of losing soldiers and everything, I still think to this day the worst thing that I experienced was the nonsupport of the American people back home. And I still feel that way today.

DePue: Why do you feel so strongly about that?

Nicklaus: Because I think that, right or wrong, we didn't say we wanted to go to Vietnam. You know, we didn't raise our hand. We didn't say, Hey, send us over there; we'll conquer the country and preserve its freedoms and whatnot. Our country sent us there, and by golly, if our country sent us there, then the people of this country should have supported us. And instead, they ridiculed us, called us names, protested, got themselves killed at Kent State, which made it even worse.

We won that war. I read a book one time about the guy, one of the generals of the North Vietnamese armies. He said that if we'd just held out a little longer, they were going to call it quits. We had them beat. If they didn't try to fight the damn war from Washington, I think old General [Chesty] Puller wanted to come back and put the Marine Corps on line and from the coast to the mountains of the border of Laos just do a sweep right up through North Vietnam, all the way through to Hanoi. We could have won that war, and we did win that war. The politicians and the people of this country lost that war, and for their lack of support and the politicians succumbing to their protests is what kept this country from achieving its goal over there. But I guarantee you that the men who fought in that country were as good as any that fought in any damn war that this country's ever fought in.

DePue: How were you hearing about the protests and the things that were going on at home?

Nicklaus: Letters and newspaper. The *Stars and Stripes* would always have big articles about it and the protests that were going on in Washington and on the college campuses.

DePue: When you're not on patrols, were you able to listen to Armed Forces Radio or anything like that?

Nicklaus: No, we didn't have any radios, unh-uh. We didn't have electricity or anything.

DePue: Okay. I suspect I know the answer here, but what did you think about your fellow Marines, the Marines that you served with?

Nicklaus: (pause) Greatest guys in the world. None better. I would go to the ends of the earth for them, and they would do the same.

DePue: How about the NCOs you had?

Nicklaus: The NCOs? Good. Very good. Very good leaders, as far as the NCOs I was associated with, which was basically E-6s and below. Each line company in the Marine Corps has a company gunny, which is an E-7, so each platoon, unlike the Army— the Army has E-7s as their platoon sergeants—Marine Corps has E-6s as platoon sergeants. So my association mainly with NCOs was corporal, maybe an E-5, but most of our squad leaders were even corporals. And they were darn good. They were damn good. They were very good. Lange, Jonesy [Jones]. Tom Lange—called him Gramps. I don't know why we called him Gramps, the same age as I was. He just looked old, I guess. Guerin was a squad leader, got killed. Very good. Very good NCOs.

DePue: And the officers?

Nicklaus: Well, there again, the one I, of course, associated with the most because he and I were together, practically joined at the hip almost, was Lieutenant Laqueur. The greatest guy in the world. I'd follow him anywhere. Super, super man. Cared for his Marines, sincerely cared for them, took care of them, watched out for us, and was a good leader. We knew that unlike some of these other lieutenants over there that would lead their platoons into stupid places and get them killed, we knew Pete would never do that. And a matter of fact, he's dead. I don't know if I told you that or not.

DePue: Unh-uh.

Nicklaus: Died of cancer. Before he did, he returned to Vietnam, and on his return, he wrote that.

DePue: Yeah, you just handed me *Return to Vietnam: A Personal Odyssey* by Peter Laqueur. It's quite long.

Nicklaus: It's a good read.

DePue: Does this talk about some of the experiences that he went through while he was there as well?

Nicklaus: Yes, many of them similar to the ones I've expressed in our interview.

DePue: Do you mind if we photocopy this sometime and include that with the interview?

Nicklaus: No, no, I would have no problem with that, and I don't think Pete would mind.

DePue: We aren't going to put that on the Internet, but we can certainly include it if somebody wants to track it down that way.

Nicklaus: And if you look in the… (pause) Here is our main area of operation.

DePue: Oh, okay.

Nicklaus: That map was our main area of operations – AOO.

DePue: Were you almost always pretty close to the ocean, then?

Nicklaus: Yeah. I would say the ocean wasn't too far away. When we'd come out of the bush, we'd always walk east, and we was always glad to see the ocean. The French fort wasn't on the ocean; it was quite a ways inland from the ocean.

DePue: Well, we've been talking about quite a few serious things. Do you remember anything that was especially humorous that stays with you today? Humorous incidents?

Nicklaus: Other than the helicopter? (laughs) Well, I can remember one time when I was feeling real bad. Apparently we must have been around one of our PPBs, and we had a four-holer set up. I remember I went up there to do my job. I sat on the darn thing, and the darn thing collapsed. (laughs) And, Oh, crap, what a day this is going to be.

Doc was always funny. I remember we was on a patrol, and I'll be doggone if Doc didn't come down with I think it was appendicitis—nighttime. I said, "Jesus, Doc, now we've got a Medevac for you, we got to get you out of here. You're a pain in the ass.", "Yeah," he says, "I just don't feel good." I said, "Okay." So then we get the Medevac, and he starts handing me things. He says, "Here, watch this," and gives me his pistol. Unbeknownst to me he had a little like a .38-caliber pistol that he carried. When I say he gave me his

pistol, I'm talking about the .45 that he carried. He gave me that, and he gave me his other pistol, then he gave me his doc bag. He says, "Keep this till I come back." And I can't carry all this stuff. You know, it was time of the moment. So we got him out of there and whatnot. I'm sure there were a lot of funny instances. I guess I just can't recall them off the top of my head.

DePue: Well, when you went over, you went over with a unit, and then, as you've already described, people start leaving one at a time to establish this rotation policy. Did you know at some point in time when you were going to be going home, and did you start to count days?

Nicklaus: Yeah, actually they had sent our platoon all the way back to Da Nang airfield. Not even Marble Mountain, but further back than that, all the way back to the airstrip at Da Nang. I don't know if it's a funny story, but I remember we were sitting there. I didn't have my radio then; I was just pulling guard duty along the fence of the airfield. Then there was Air Force guys there, and these Air Force guys come walking by, and I said, "Hey, you guys got anything to drink?" And they said, "Yeah." They hand me their canteen, and I started to take a drink, and I said, "Holy crap, what's that?" And they said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Is that ice in there?" "Yeah." We hadn't seen ice since the time we landed, and this was iced tea with ice in it. I said, "You guys get iced tea with ice?" They're carrying the AR-15. And we hadn't seen the AR-15 [lightweight semi-automatic rifle]; we were still carrying the old M-14. But anyway, that night then I was in a bunker, and I heard a call come over; I wasn't on watch at the time, but I heard a call come over, and I heard somebody say "Nicklaus and Majors." So I heard my name, and then the next morning they said, "You two are going to be leaving on an airplane out of there."

DePue: Before that, when did you think you'd be shipping home?

Nicklaus: I had no idea. Really, had no clue. I didn't know if they were going to keep us there—like I said earlier—for another thirteen months from the time we landed. I really didn't know. I was just glad to be told that I was going home. They took us to Da Nang, we flew out of Da Nang to Okinawa, did whatever it was we had to do at Okinawa, and we got on a C-130 and flew back to El Toro Marine Corps Air Station, El Toro, California, and then got orders from there to go to Cherry Point, North Carolina.

DePue: Can you tell us a little bit about your reunion with Carol coming back?

Nicklaus: Yeah. I got my orders at El Toro, and I called home. We got a leave in between El Toro and having to report to our new duty station, so I told them I'd be flying out of LAX into O'Hare. It was a late flight, and I remember my mom and dad and her were there to greet me when I come off the plane. I was happy to see them, of course. And then we came home, here, and then her and I took off for a day, I think. Of course, I saw my son. She didn't bring him

with her, but when I got home, of course I saw him. We just took a day for ourselves and then spent time here with the family and everything and then drove out to North Carolina and Cherry Point.

DePue: On your return to the States, did you encounter any protesters or any treatment from the general public that surprised you?

Nicklaus: I didn't, personally, because, for one thing, we flew right into El Toro, so that was pretty well protected, you know, Marine Corps Base. And then I didn't get to O'Hare until late at night. Despite all the protesting that was going on, in this small community there wasn't a whole lot of public protesting going on. I don't think people even knew I was home anyway. You know, you've heard this. There was no fanfare or anything, of course. I flew into O'Hare, I get off the airplane by myself. O'Hare was almost deserted that late at night. Like I said, my mom, my dad, and Carol were there. We get in the car, we come home, stay here for a couple of weeks and drive out to North Carolina. So I don't even know if the public even knew I was home anyway.

DePue: How much more of your four-year tour did you have remaining at that time?

Nicklaus: That was in April of '66, and I was released from active duty in June of '67, so about—April, May, June—about fourteen months.

DePue: Did you have any thoughts at that time about reenlisting?

Nicklaus: No. I had another child born out in North Carolina, in March of '67. First they promoted me to corporal and then they promoted me to sergeant in March or April of '67, and I knew that with an 0311 MOS that if I stayed in I'd go back to Vietnam, and a wife and two kids, that probably wouldn't be a real smart move. I felt lucky that I survived one time, one tour. Some guys liked to go back. Some guys went back two or three times. I had no desire to do that.

DePue: Did you have any difficulties coming back to the States and decompressing, adjusting back to a different lifestyle?

Nicklaus: Oh, yeah. Yeah, it was like walking into a different world. You know, we're living for months and months and months without living with any of this—running water, toilets, go to the refrigerator when you want to, have a beer when you want to—and all of a sudden, here everything's available. That was one rude awakening. And the other one was, you know, when you're around a bunch of guys, Marines, you talk. You all talk the same language; you all act the same way. Then when you re-acclimate yourself to the world, so to speak, it took a while to realize that I wasn't around a bunch of Marines and I couldn't act that way any longer. I think I had a temper. I would get mad at the littlest things and go off. But, I don't know, I guess eventually it settled in.

DePue: Was it hard for Carol to understand all of that?

Nicklaus: Oh, I'm sure it was. I'm sure it was very hard for her. I'm sure it was very difficult, and with a one-year-old son. He was thirteen months old by the time I saw him again, so she had to raise him for the first thirteen months. Not all by herself—she lived with her mom and dad over here in Sterling.

Nicklaus: But then when I came back, you know, then she was away from her surroundings—being her mom and dad which yes, she's their daughter and they're going to take good care of her—then all of a sudden we're back together. We got married in June of '64, and then I left in March of '65, so what's that? Nine months. So I'm gone longer than we've been together. So it took a lot of adjusting, and I'm sure she couldn't understand the anger, the temper, the way I acted a lot of times.

DePue: What was the anger directed at?

Nicklaus: I think just little things. Maybe Brett crying or something not being the way I thought it should be. Or I should be able to do whatever I want and she didn't want me to, and I thought I've earned this right. That was a very selfish feeling. But we got through it. Came home, you know, in '67, and went to work, and the rest of our journey went on.

DePue: Mm-hmm. Did you tell her much about your experiences when you got back together?

Nicklaus: No, uh-uh.

DePue: Why not?

Nicklaus: Because (pause) it would be so difficult for anyone to understand exactly what it was that we did, what it was we went through, what it was we experienced, what it was we endured, the misery we lived in. You can't—I can't. Maybe some people can. I know you've wrote a book. Maybe you can. I can't express myself enough to make it realistic enough. I can't express myself so that I can express realistically enough so you would understand what I'm talking about. So why try? Why bother? So I didn't. I just kept it. She didn't ask a lot of questions, anyway, so.

DePue: Well, this is before we've had all this discussion about things like PTSD. Would you say that you were suffering from that a little bit?

Nicklaus: Well, PTSD is kind of a catchall, I think: if you've got problems, blame it on PTSD. So I'm not going to go there. I'm not going to say that I had PTSD. I want to say that I had just some lingering effects from my experiences that I needed to work myself through and get over. But post-traumatic stress disorder—I think it would be a copout if I said I had that.

DePue: Okay. You've kind of suggested that you have, but do you think that you came from Vietnam, then, a changed person?

Nicklaus: I think so, yeah. Probably wouldn't want to admit it at the time. I felt at the time I went over one person and came back home and I was still that same person, but now that I look back on it, I wasn't. I was different.

DePue: Going over, do you think you were still a kid?

Nicklaus: What was I? Let's see, '65.

DePue: You'd have been twenty.

Nicklaus: Yeah, I'd have been nineteen when I went over, turned twenty when I was there. Yeah, nineteen, twenty. I'm sure that we all felt that we could conquer the world and we could do anything. You know how nineteen-year-olds are. We're invincible, and we could do anything we set our minds to and yadda yadda. But once we got over there, we found out we weren't so invincible, first of all, and we found out what it was really like, what war was really like. War is ugly. War is ugly.

DePue: We've been at it for close to two and a half hours here. I think this is probably a good place to break. I do want to have another session so we can talk about the second half of your military career (Nicklaus laughs) and going over to Desert Storm, I believe, right?

Nicklaus: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

DePue: Do you have any final comments today in ending up, reflections on your experiences in Vietnam?

Nicklaus: I guess I would just want everyone to know that what I did—first of all, being a Marine is just such an honor. There again, to try to explain to you what being a Marine is, I can't do that, but you'd have to be one to understand. That's why we all wear our stuff that still says Marine Corps and fly our flag and whatnot. But I still feel we had a purpose in Vietnam. I still feel that our men that died over there didn't die for no reason or no cause at all. I think they did. You know, my God, how can we actually say that 51,800 names on a wall don't mean something to this country? So just, yeah, proud of what we did, and if I had to do it all over again, I would. I don't know why, but I would.

DePue: Then Eddy, let's end with that. Thank you very much.

Nicklaus: You're welcome.

(end of interview #1 interview #2 continues)

Interview with Eddy Nicklaus

VRV-A-L-2011-003.02

Interview # 2: February 17, 2011

Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: Today is Thursday, February 17, 2011. This is Mark DePue, the Director of Oral History with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. I'm here in Sterling, Illinois, on this overcast morning with Eddy Nicklaus. How are you, Eddy?

Nicklaus: I'm fine, thank you.

DePue: This is part two of an interview we had, but very distinct parts, because part one dealt with your experiences as a Marine in the Vietnam War, and part two is going to focus about your experiences as a member of the Army National Guard in Desert Shield/Desert Storm in 1990–91.

Nicklaus: That's correct.

DePue: So let's start with this, since we had pretty much left with the end of the Vietnam era and your coming back home and getting a job. Why don't you pick it up from there? What did you do at the end of your tour after Vietnam as far as a civilian career is concerned?

Nicklaus: Well, I came back to the States and I still had time to my enlistment, so I received orders to go to Cherry Point, North Carolina. I served out my enlistment there. And I was released from active duty June thirteenth of 1967. During that time while I was at Cherry Point, my second son was born. So we packed up the car and we came back to Illinois, Rock Falls, and then—about, I'd say, within a month—I was working for Prudential Insurance Company. I became an agent in Dixon, later transferred to Sterling in '78. I retired with Prudential in January 2001, but I took an agent emeritus contract and continued working for them for about another four years and then sent them a

letter telling them I was resigning my agent emeritus contract and that I was pretty much completely done and retired.

DePue: When you came back in 1967—came off of active duty—it sounds like you did not join the Marine Corps Reserve or National Guard at that time?

Nicklaus: No. We still had two years' obligation on our six-year contract with the Marine Corps.

DePue: "We" being you and Teddy.

Nicklaus: Right. But them two years were served in the inactive Reserve, so we never got a call. Actually, we didn't have two years; we had 'til February of '69, because we enlisted in the delayed entry program in February of '63, so they took the six years from that point. So in February of 1969, that's when we received in the mail our honorable discharge from the Marine Corps.

DePue: What did Teddy do, then, when he came from Vietnam?

Nicklaus: He went to work for the Rock Falls electric department and was still working for them when he died in March of '97.

DePue: Did he marry, then, after he came back?

Nicklaus: He married before he got out of the Marine Corps, also. He married in November of 1966. He married Jeanette. He was stationed down at Parris Island, South Carolina. He was a rifle range instructor for the recruits there.

DePue: Did he meet Jeanette down there, then?

Nicklaus: No, no, he met her when he came back from Vietnam, when he was home on leave here in Rock Falls, in Sterling. They were introduced and hit it off, I guess, pretty well, and continued their relationship, and the next thing you know, they're married in November.

DePue: Well, I guess they did hit it off pretty well.

Nicklaus: I guess they did, yeah. (laughs)

DePue: Did you stay in touch with some of your Marine Corps buddies?

Nicklaus: When I first got out, well, there was one of them that lived in Iowa, and he came over to Sterling. Actually, he lived with me for a little while. I was living in Nachusa at the time, actually.

DePue: In where?

Nicklaus: Nachusa. That's a small town east of Dixon about seven miles. He was looking for work, and I think I mentioned in our earlier interview about the

steel mill at Sterling was a huge employer, and so he was able to get a job there. He actually settled here in Sterling and lived here for several years, but then he's since moved back to Iowa.

DePue: Ray Saffel. And then Tom Lange—and I think I might have mentioned him before too—

Nicklaus: Lange, you say?

DePue: L-a-n-g-e.

Nicklaus: When Tom got out, he must have decided to take a trip cross-country, because I know I did not see him. My mom and dad said that somebody that was with me in Vietnam stopped, and it had to be Tom, the way they identified him. So I had his address, and I think we wrote a couple of letters back and forth. I think I might have mentioned to you too, Tom Lange eventually wound up working for the Los Angeles police department and was the investigating detective on the O.J. Simpson case.

DePue: Wow.

Nicklaus: Yeah. Served quite a bit of time on it—you could see his mug on TV quite a bit. We've gotten together since. A lot of the guys from our platoon have gotten together since. I guess as we got older, for whatever reason, we do. We've gotten together about three or four times, and most of them have been since the O.J. thing. He doesn't ever bring it up, and we don't ask him, but he's got no airs about it or anything. I mean, he's just still Tom Lange to us. Pretty down-to-earth guy, real nice guy.

DePue: All of this is leading up to you and Teddy getting back into the military.

Nicklaus: Yeah, yeah. For some reason, I don't know. We got out, like I said, in '67, and now it's 1982 and he gives me a call—

DePue: "He" being?

Nicklaus: I'm living here. I'm living right at this address here.

DePue: Teddy, your twin, gave you a call?

Nicklaus: Yeah, yeah. And he said, "Hey, I saw an ad in the paper, about the National Guard. Let's go talk to them." "Why? Why do I want to go? After fifteen years, why do I want to go?" "Oh, let's just go talk to them." I said, "Well, if I'm going to back in the military, I'm going to go in the Marine Corps Reserves." So he says, "Well, okay." So I said, "Well, let's go over to the Rock Island Arsenal and we'll talk to the Marine Corps Reserves,". We got over there and talked to them, and, you know, "What's your primary MOS?" It was 0311. "Okay," they says, "well, you'd have to come in here and you'd

have to get re-qualified, and the only way you can do that is go to 29 Palms [Marine Base, California] for six months to get MOS-qualified. And you'll also have to reduce your rank by one pay grade." Well, that didn't sit very well.

DePue: What would the rank have been if you did that?

Nicklaus: I was an E-5, Sergeant E-5, so I would have gone back to Corporal E-4. Ted was a Corporal E-4; he would have had to go back to a Lance Corporal E-3. And we told them, There's no way we can take six months out of our lives and go to 29 Palms. Finally, to make a long story short, we ended up talking to the recruiter over at Rock Falls Armory, took the test. He said, "You guys can come back in the same rank you were when you got out fifteen years ago." Said, "Really? What about MOS?" "No, we're a cav unit. We've got infantry here. So 0311 will just equate to 11 bravo in the Army." So no big deal.

DePue: What was the unit here in Sterling? Or is it Rock Falls?

Nicklaus: Rock Falls. Well, at that time, it was Troop E, 106th Cav. We were with the brigade out of Chicago.

DePue: The 33rd Infantry Brigade. At that time it was the—

Nicklaus: Yeah, the 33rd Infantry Brigade. Correct, correct.

DePue: What does a cav unit do?

Nicklaus: (laughs) Well, the Troop E, 106th Cav had M113 APCs, armored personnel carriers, and they had tanks. So each platoon consisted of a squad of infantry. Oh, I can't remember the whole makeup, but I know that there was mortarmen—we had mortars, and we had tankers. Then they changed the 11 bravos and made some of us 19 deltas, which is scouts. I don't know what the big difference was.

DePue: I think that was a new MOS at the time.

Nicklaus: Okay. So anyway, we became 19 deltas then. And a lot of our ATs were spent. Well, we went down to Fort Benning, we went up to Ripley, we went to McCoy. You would practice screening missions. The battlefield doctrine was still, as you know, the World War II concept. You know, the Russians with their massive tanks and all this and that stuff, and so our training was geared toward stopping the Russians and their tank assaults, et cetera, et cetera. Why they still maintain that mentality was quite surprising to me. As you know, you get a little wiser with age—supposed to, anyway. At least militarily I certainly did. And I thought, Vietnam was nothing like World War II. What did we learn from fighting in Vietnam when we're right back fighting the

same doctrine of World War II? I guess they still thought the Russians were a threat in Europe and that's where we'd finally meet them on the battlefield.

DePue: Nineteen eighty-two, the Soviet military was huge; they had a lot more armored and artillery and infantry forces, and most of them were in the western Soviet Union and in the Soviet bloc countries.

Nicklaus: I'm sure that this dictated why we fought or why we still trained like we did.

DePue: Did you find that the E 106th Cav, the cav mentality was a good match for the old Marine Corps hoo-ah mentality?

Nicklaus: (laughs) Let's say I found the Army and their training to be completely—well, I won't say completely—let's say I found it to be very different than what the Marine Corps was.

DePue: Different better?

Nicklaus: No.

DePue: —different worse?

Nicklaus: No. And don't get me wrong; there's a lot of good people in the Army, and there are a lot of good people in the National Guard, there really are. You know as well as I do, the National Guard is unique because they have not only raw recruits from off of the street, but the National Guard is made up of former Marines, former Navy, Air Force, you know, all walks of different military life. But I've found the training to be not as disciplined, and, I don't know, there just didn't seem to be the pride there that there was in the Marine Corps amongst the Army guys. But it was still good. It was still good training. We worked well together. Like I say, we had some good people. I eventually became a section leader for the scouts.

DePue: How many people were you in charge of at that time?

Nicklaus: All the scouts that were in our platoon, meaning APCs and stuff. A lot of times we would do night moves, so you had to be able to read the compass, be able to read the map, be able to even read the stars. A lot of the time you had to move by stars.

DePue: How many people would be in a section?

Nicklaus: Oh, boy, what was there? Probably twelve to fifteen, maybe?

DePue: Were you a staff sergeant by that time?

Nicklaus: I was a staff sergeant at that time, yes.

DePue: What did you enjoy about being in the National Guard, then? Because you obviously stuck with it.

Nicklaus: Stuck with it, sure did. The camaraderie was good. You know, there were other guys, believe it or not, that were our age that were just coming in also. Merrill Beck, he's my age, and he came in shortly after we did. It was amazing how many people, late thirties, were joining the Guard or still in the Guard. The drills were good. A lot of times I felt the training could have been better. We tried to make sure that our soldiers didn't just sit around, because you know as well as I do, a bored soldier is going to get bored and he's going to leave, (DePue laughs) or he ain't going to show up again. But yeah, okay, I'll be perfectly honest, after drill we'd go to the bar and sit around and have some beer and have a good time.

DePue: Did you tell war stories at the bar?

Nicklaus: I don't think we ever really told war stories. We just had enough other stories to tell amongst each other.

DePue: What'd you think about the officers that you encountered those first few years?

Nicklaus: They were certainly nothing like Lieutenant Laqueur. My first platoon leader in the Guard was Lieutenant Gordon, and it's like typical second lieutenant; he just needed to gain experience and learn from his senior NCOs. Most of the lieutenants I ran into did that. They knew that they had to learn. Some of them came in with a chip on their shoulder and, "I'm the officer and you're the enlisted man, and you're going to do what I tell you, whether it's right or wrong." So those guys, you just kind of ignore as much as you can. I mean, you do what they tell you, but you don't go asking them a bunch of questions or anything.

DePue: Over the next few years, then, did you continue to move up in rank?

Nicklaus: I did, and became a platoon sergeant, E-7. Can't tell you exactly when. Well, it was after we became transportation. The Cav went away in 1980.

DePue: Seven.

Nicklaus: Thank you, 1987. Then of course we became long-haul transportation. We were M-915s; it was forty-foot trailers.

DePue: Are these semi-trucks basically?

Nicklaus: Basically, mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

DePue: Now, I wanted to have you spend some time on this because, you know, there's a mentality with being in a Cav unit: essentially you're infantry plus, at

least as far as the mentality in the Army was concerned. Now you're going to be truck drivers. Was that a difficult transition for your unit?

Nicklaus: Oh, yeah. We hated the idea, yeah. We thought it was terrible. You're right, there is a mentality; you know, we're combat-ready, we're combat-tested, we're combat soldiers, and now you're telling us that, Oh, you guys are going to love this. You're going to think you're in heaven because you're going to become truck drivers. Well, we don't want to become truck drivers. That's for the people that can't be combat soldiers. So yeah, we really fought it. And we were not very happy. For a long time, we weren't very happy.

DePue: Did you lose a lot of people?

Nicklaus: Some of the people went down to Streator with the Cav. Some went to other units. But I would say probably the majority stayed in Rock Falls. The reason we stayed instead of relocating was there again just simply because of location.

DePue: Did you think at this time, either when you were in E 106th, or I guess the new unit is the 1644th Transportation Company?

Nicklaus: Correct, correct.

DePue: Was there an expectation that we might be called up sometime and deployed overseas?

Nicklaus: Oh, no. When the transition was happening?

DePue: Well, anytime during this period.

Nicklaus: No, not during the transition period. There probably wasn't two people in that unit that had any idea what a transportation unit was going to do, what their mission was going to be, what would be expected of us, or anything. But we had no crystal ball or anything that made us think for any reason that we'd be mobilized for anything.

DePue: Do you know the last time that the National Guard, any National Guard unit, was called up for combat?

Nicklaus: In Illinois? No. Nope, I don't.

DePue: I think that there was one unit perhaps during the Vietnam war, and otherwise you go back to the Korean War.

Nicklaus: Yeah, it'd been a long time, so why would we think we would be? Wasn't anything going on anyway.

DePue: Once you got into the mission of the 1644 Transportation Company, did you grow to appreciate or to like that mission?

Nicklaus: Well, at first, I'll tell you, there was a line drawn almost right down the middle of the floor, because when the 16th came to us, they came out of Chicago, and a lot of the soldiers that were in the 16th came with it. We were told by our first sergeant that when the 16th came to Rock Falls, we would be given all the leadership positions. Well, somebody told them guys that if they came with the 16th to Rock Falls, they would get the leadership positions. So honestly, right from the get-go there was a real big defensive shield put up: You guys stay over there because we don't like you, and we'll stay over here because we know you guys don't like us. It took a while to break that barrier down. But it finally started dissipating, and I'd say maybe over the course of time, a year, two years, it finally…

I'm not going to pull any punches. They were mostly black, and we were mostly white out here. You know, I served with plenty of minorities in the Marine Corps, and it didn't bother me, but when we joined the Guard here, there was none, absolutely none. Well, there might have been some Hispanics. But these guys were basically all African-American, and they had their way of doing things, and we had our way of doing things, and they certainly weren't identical.

DePue: Well, maybe I shouldn't pursue it, but their way of doing things…

Nicklaus: (laughs) Their way of doing things was pretty much—my concept of it, anyway—is, If we get it done, we get it done; if we don't, no big deal. Where our concept was, If we've got a mission or we're told to do something, do it, get it done, and then we'll move to the next thing. And they didn't seem to have that sense of urgency.

DePue: Did you personally have to go through a reclassification course?

Nicklaus: Yes.

DePue: What's the MOS for truck drivers?

Nicklaus: Eighty-eight Mike [M].

DePue: What was the reclassification course like?

Nicklaus: Pretty much OJT [on-the-job training]. Actually, some of the guys from the old 16th, who were already MOS-qualified, of course, are the ones who trained us on the tractors and trailers.

DePue: Who ended up being the first sergeant?

Nicklaus: Well, we had a guy by the name of Pankhurst at first.

DePue: Was that somebody from the Chicago area?

Nicklaus: No, he just had joined us at the cav. He was right in the transition period. And we had another guy, too, and I can't remember his name. He was something. But anyway, he left. The captain that came with the 1644th, the company commander; he was also the company commander up at Chicago; His name was Captain Nila.

DePue: You remember the first name?

Nicklaus: Brett. Excellent company commander. You know, there again, new guy comes in and we're going to put up our defenses, but we soon learned that the guy was a straight shooter and straightforward. You do your job, and that's all he'll ask, and he won't get in your way and won't micromanage. He was a very good company commander. He knew the problems that were out there on the floor, you know, the drill floor. He didn't try to be the great emancipator or anything like that; he just dealt with them as he had to and it worked out. It worked out.

DePue: Tell me a little bit about the first annual training experience, because I would think that would be critical to getting the unit to become a little bit more cohesive.

Nicklaus: Yeah. That was an experience. Our first annual training we were going down to Fort Hood, Texas. I was platoon sergeant and Ted was the assistant platoon sergeant. I can't remember what Beck was, because he was in our CUCV [Commercial Utility Cargo Vehicle] too. The CUCV was the command and control vehicle for each platoon leader. I don't think we even had a lieutenant at first. So anyway, we headed west, and we were supposed to make sure all the trucks got off at— What's that big truck stop into Iowa there?

DePue: Is it the Dixie?

Nicklaus: It starts with a *W*.

DePue: The Walcott.

Nicklaus: Walcott, yeah. So the platoon sergeant from the 3rd Platoon, he claimed that we weren't there to get the trucks off, so it started off on a bad note. We went to a place in some old deserted airfield somewhere in Oklahoma or someplace. Actually, the company was split up into two. One went to the south to pick up some stuff down in—and I might be getting these ATs confused, might be mingling them together. But I know one of the first ATs, we stopped at this deserted airfield, and here again, when we woke up in the morning, all the whites were there and all the blacks weren't there. Well, where's the black soldiers? Well, they went to the lieutenant, and he authorized them to go into town and stay in a motel. Yeah. You would know him, too. Maybe I shouldn't even say his name. So that didn't sit well. And

this is on the way down to Fort Hood. So by the time we get down there, relations are pretty strained. But then we start running missions. And we had some pretty good missions. We put APCs [armored personnel carriers] on the back of our trailers and took it down to Austin, Texas. We took some stuff up in the panhandle.

Nicklaus: So we had a pretty successful AT, but it sure didn't get off the ground very well.

DePue: Well, it sounds like your AT is in the transportation company; you're doing real-world missions.

Nicklaus: Real-world missions. That was the difference between that and the Cav, yeah. The Cav, we're out in the boondocks simulating, where on the transportation side, we actually had missions to perform while we're at annual training, and a lot of times during the regular course of the year.

DePue: Well, I wanted to take a little bit of diversion here. You and Teddy decide to do this in 1982. What was going on in your personal life at that time? What was the family's reaction to his?

Nicklaus: I really don't recall what the family's reaction was.

DePue: You were still married?

Nicklaus: Yeah, I was still married to Carol and had three kids. Brett, my oldest son, would have been going into his senior year in high school, because I think he graduated in '83. Lance would have been maybe a freshman, and Eric… So they were all older. I don't remember them having any problem with it. My wife didn't have no problem with it.

DePue: (overlapping) Well, it is a little extra money.

Nicklaus: Yeah, a little extra money. And, you know, when you join the Guard, you get to come in and try one year and see if you like it, so apparently we tried one year. And then they had bonuses, so you reenlist and you get this bonus, half of it up front, I think, and the rest of it over so many years.

DePue: Were you thinking by this time you actually wanted to stay in long enough to retire?

Nicklaus: I don't know when that final decision was made. I think when we enlisted after the first year, we enlisted for six years, and I think somewhere in the six-year period, we figured we'd be there till we got our twenty. So we probably knew we were going to stick around.

DePue: But to reach your twenty years, what year would that be, do you recall?

Nicklaus: Well, we had four years active in the Marine Corps, so you have one in '82, so we had sixteen years to finish there, so that would have been 1998.

DePue: So you had a ways to go.

Nicklaus: Had a ways to go. Oh, yeah, had a ways to go.

DePue: Okay. Well, let's get up to the point, then, in the summer of 1990—now, this is two or three years after the reorganization—what was your rank at that time?

Nicklaus: E-7.

DePue: And you're still a platoon sergeant.

Nicklaus: Sergeant first class, so right.

DePue: Okay. Do you recall what you did for the annual training that year?

Nicklaus: In 1990. (pause) No, I don't. I can't recall. So I really don't know.

DePue: Do you recall August 2, 1990, when Saddam Hussein's Iraqis invaded Kuwait?

Nicklaus: I recall that, and then I recall shortly after that one of our sister companies in the trans battalion, the 1544th in Parris, they got deployed, and another one was deployed as well.

DePue: The 1244th?

Nicklaus: Mm… Was it twelve…?

DePue: The 1244th was mobilized the twentieth of September, and the 1544th was mobilized the twenty-seventh of September.

Nicklaus: Okay. So we knew that them two had been mobilized. The 1344th down in St. —I don't believe they ever got mobilized.

DePue: No. What were you thinking at that time, then?

Nicklaus: Well, we pretty much can see the handwriting on the wall. But then, see, these two companies, the 12th and the 13th, were light/medium transportation companies, meaning they had trucks that transported troops, like deuce-and-a-halfs [6 wheeled trucks] and stuff like that, where we were long haul. Like I said, we had the forty-foot trailers and the tractors. Well, what are you going to do with a forty-foot trailer and a tractor in the desert? So we thought that it was a possibility, but then we tried to put two and two together and rationalize it and think, Why would they deploy us, because they don't need us.

DePue: At this point in time, there's obviously a lot going on at the world stage, and United Nations is involved. But the posture that President [H. W.] Bush had taken was that we're simply going to discourage the Iraqis from invading Saudi Arabia, so it was pretty much a defensive, and there was minimal combat troops that were being deployed, and, as you said, a couple other units that were being deployed as well from the National Guard and Reserve. Okay, what was the attitude, the atmosphere, when you went to drills during those first couple months after the actual invasion of Kuwait?

Nicklaus: Well, I think the intensity of our training stepped up somewhat, and of course then we were told we would be going through a—what do they call that when you get deployed? You had to go to Marseilles and go through—you know, where you take your record book and everything and you go see the doctor and all this and that stuff—I can't remember what they call that.

DePue: IRT or something like that? I should know it myself.

Nicklaus: So they did have us do that like in September or October.

DePue: Were there a lot of rumors flying around?

Nicklaus: Oh, yeah, there were lots of rumors. Yeah, you're going to be deployed, you're going to do this, you're going to do that, but nobody knew anything.

DePue: What was the leadership telling you?

Nicklaus: Be prepared. But there was no warning order or anything at that time, not in the August to October timeframe. I'd say October is when we really got told that we probably want to make sure we have all our ducks in a row, if you will. And they even said, you know, the wills, power of attorneys. Then we knew this could be getting serious here.

DePue: What was Carol thinking at this time?

Nicklaus: I think she was worried, very worried. Let's see, that was—yeah, the boys were gone, so we had just her and I in the house. I know she didn't want me to go. I had been once, so I guess she was afraid and didn't want me to go again.

DePue: How about the morale of the unit?

Nicklaus: The morale of the unit was good.

DePue: By that time, had the divisions that you talked about before been dissolved?

Nicklaus: Yeah. By that time, everybody was just green, know what I mean? You wore a green uniform. Everybody was just a soldier in a green uniform. No more of this line down the middle, no more racial stuff. We were a tight group, and I

mean, the blacks, the whites, the Hispanics. It was back kind of like the Marine Corps; it was a good, tight-knit group.

DePue: Did the expectation that you might be deployed make everybody more serious on the drills and in the training that they were going through?

Nicklaus: I believe it did. I think they're seeing the handwriting on the wall, and they knew that this is not just going through the motions anymore. This was not a game anymore, not that it ever was a game.

DePue: Did it improve morale and discipline or eat away at it to know that you might be deployed?

Nicklaus: I would say it improved morale. I think it certainly improved the discipline of the unit. It also improved the tightness of the unit—became a closer group.

DePue: Well, I believe it was November eighth, around that timeframe, that President Bush started to order additional troops to the area. The reason was that now there was an expectation that we weren't necessarily strictly going to stay on the defensive but that the United Nations forces were seeking to push the Iraqis out of Kuwait.

Nicklaus: Correct.

DePue: That changes the ballgame completely. Do you recall your reaction to that news?

Nicklaus: Not really, although I knew that if you're going to start kicking somebody out, first of all, how far are you going to kick them out, which just really hadn't been defined at that time. Second of all, when you're in a defensive posture, that's one thing, but when you go on the offensive, then you're going to have casualties, there's no doubt about it. After we got deployed, we were being told to expect all kinds of horror things, all kind of casualties, all kinds of their tanks were going to be this awesome and that the Republican National Guard was one of the best units in the world. They had hundreds of thousands of soldiers, and so forth. So when we deployed and went over there, we went over there with the expectation of we're possibly having KIAs and WIAs.

DePue: Even in a transportation company.

Nicklaus: Oh, yeah, yeah.

DePue: You're a Vietnam veteran. You'd gone through that—we talked about this last time—the disappointment, the pain involved with the way the American public responded to what happened in Vietnam. What were your thoughts about going over to this war and whether or not it was the right war to be pursuing?

Nicklaus: Well, first of all, during this whole process, all the way from probably August until almost a year later—over for us, anyway, almost a year later—you could see the complete difference in the populace of this country because they were behind this. They supported President Bush, they supported the military being over there, they supported the soldiers. They had sendoffs; we had a gala sendoff here when we left. And there was yellow ribbons all over the place and people were singing songs. So the support was just a complete 180-degree difference from what Vietnam was.

DePue: Did you appreciate that?

Nicklaus: Yeah, I appreciated it very much. It meant a lot to me, and it was very heartwarming. Yeah, it really was.

DePue: You mentioned, in the October drill, there was a lot more serious discussion about the possibility. Was the assumption by October that you would be mobilized?

Nicklaus: Well, we suspected, but there again, we hadn't seen anything on paper. Well, I hadn't. Captain Wheatley was our captain at that time—no, actually it was Lieutenant Wheatley as the CO before. When we got deployed, they says, "You're not going over there without a captain," so they made him a captain. And matter of fact, there's another thing. Just prior to that— I think that 1990 AT was at Fort Hood. And the reason I say that is because half of the Company went to Fort Hood and the other half went out to Letterkenny, New York. Some went out there to do missions. We went down to Fort Hood. And at that time Lieutenant Wheatley had me as the acting first sergeant.

DePue: Were you in the Fort Hood part?

Nicklaus: Mm-hmm. Then when we got back, I think they were actually going to make me the first sergeant. No, that's not true—we had a cook who was an E-7—because I had to be an E-6 at that time. When I was an E-6 they were going to make me the first sergeant, then the battalion commander said, "Well, don't you have any E-7s that want to be a first sergeant?" Our cook, Grove, said he wanted to be the first sergeant. So I know he was made the first sergeant just, like, that year.

DePue: Nineteen ninety?

Nicklaus: Somewhere in there, yeah, yeah. Grove. Not a man who led by example.

DePue: Remember his first name?

Nicklaus: Bill, or William.

DePue: Was he then the first sergeant for the deployment itself?

Nicklaus: He was in the same category as Wheatley. He was still an E-7, and they says, "We're not going to send you over there without a captain as a company commander and without a first sergeant." So he didn't have to go through any of the schools or anything and they made him a first sergeant. Took him out of the mess hall and made him first sergeant.

DePue: The actual mobilization date for the unit is November 21st, at least on the official records. Do you remember hearing that news?

Nicklaus: November 15th, I remember hearing that news. Got a call on November 15th saying, "We've got orders. We're going to be activated. You need to report to the armory on November 21st."

DePue: So the alert actually happened on the 15th.

Nicklaus: Mm-hmm, yep. Remember that very well.

DePue: What were your thoughts then?

Nicklaus: Here we go. It's really happening. You know, all the talk, all the rumors don't make any difference now; it's a fact, and pack your gear; here we go.

DePue: Your civilian employer at the time?

Nicklaus: Oh, very cooperative. No problem. I mean, what could they do?

DePue: And Carol's reaction to it?

Nicklaus: Not good. Still didn't want me to go. Even tried a few things to—you know, at least one thing—to keep me from going, which I didn't appreciate. She called the captain up at Fort Sheridan and said I had problems and I wanted to talk to the chaplain. I said, "What's this all about?" He said, "Well, your wife called and said you got problems," because she was trying to keep me from going, I guess.

DePue: That you had problems or that she had problems?

Nicklaus: I had problems, I guess. I don't know. I said, "I don't have any problems." He talked to me and says, "You don't have any problems. Go back to work."

DePue: Well, are you willing to elaborate in what problems she was suggesting you had?

Nicklaus: I don't even remember. Depression. I don't know. She can fabricate some pretty amazing things. At that time my marriage was having problems anyway, so I think it was a ploy, a last-ditch effort on her part to keep me from going so that she could keep me here and maybe save our marriage or whatever. I don't know.

DePue: Were you excited about the opportunity to go?

Nicklaus: Yeah. Yes, I was. Well, yeah, once we found out we were going to go. I think I was more proud. You know, hey, we got a job to do, we're in the National Guard, and they think that we're good enough to go over there and help this country, then that's good. That's good. That says something about us, something about our unit.

DePue: Walk us through, then, what happened after the mobilization date in terms of the training and preparation that you went through.

Nicklaus: Well, we was at the armory, and then we staged all our vehicles down at the Northwestern Steel and Wire parking lot, which is on the west end of Sterling, and we left by platoon for Fort Sheridan. That was going to be our home from November until we left on an airplane out of Mitchell Airfield to Saudi Arabia. While at Sheridan, they decided that all of our green tractors and trailers should be painted brown, so for a good amount of the time up there, we worked in shifts—each platoon had a shift—and they would run our tractors and trailers in, and we would sand them and do this and that, and then commercial painters were painting them. They painted all 60 tractors and all 120 trailers. We put them on rail.

DePue: Were they camouflaged, or were they just…

Nicklaus: No, just plain brown, light brown, tan brown. It was a waste of taxpayers' money, especially when we got over there and most of the other units' vehicles were still camouflage green. What'd we paint ours for? You couldn't see that camouflage green any better in the desert than our tan ones. The idea was, of course, to blend in with the sand. I think the idea was to make some commercial painters very rich. But, you know, they didn't ask E-7s at that time what we thought. We did a lot of PT up there. We ran a lot. We had some little active duty Major. Didn't care for him very much. This Grove that was our first sergeant could probably run from here to—I don't know—a block down the road, then he'd stop. Like I said, he didn't lead by example very well.

But anyways, it went well. Captain Wheatley managed to get some buses up there. We came home for about three days for Christmas, which was kind of good and kind of bad, because coming back home again after we'd already said our goodbyes and left, now we got to do it all over again.

Then it was back to [Fort] Sheridan, finished up with the tractors and trailers, put them on rail, and they railed them out to the East Coast. We were told that anything you don't want to carry with you on the plane, put in your vehicle, and it'll be there when we offload the vehicles at the port at Saudi Arabia. So we were told, take hard candy and this and that stuff, so we put stuff in our CUCV, our Blazer. A lot of guys put stuff in their tractors. To

make a long story short, these yo-yo longshoremen out there at the East Coast—I don't know what port it was, Norfolk or somewhere—they broke into our vehicles and took all the stuff out of it. I thought, that's not a way to treat guys that are going over to combat, for crying out loud.

DePue: Did you have some troops that accompanied the equipment out there?

Nicklaus: Uh-huh, uh-huh, but they were just like E-5s and below. They're the same ones that also rode the ship with our equipment from the port—wherever it was, Norfolk or whichever port it was—all the way over to Saudi.

DePue: So what do a bunch of truck drivers do when you don't have your trucks there anymore? Was it just immediately thereafter that you flew in?

Nicklaus: Yeah, it wasn't much later that we were transported to Billy Mitchell Field in Wisconsin. That was an experience. They got us on the airplane—Tower Airlines.

DePue: Commercial?

Nicklaus: Mm-hmm. We go running down the airstrip. We come wheeling back and they try it again. We go powering down the airstrip, and we come wheeling back. I think they did that three times, then we all disembarked the plane. We had to spend the night in the hangar while the plane flew empty back to New York and they put a new engine on it. Then it flew back to Billy Mitchell Field, and we all got on it again. We certainly did not feel very confident about this airplane. But it got us there.

DePue: Did you have weapons with you?

Nicklaus: Oh, yeah. Yeah, we had our weapons with us.

DePue: Any ammunition?

Nicklaus: No. No, we didn't even have any in our magazines.

DePue: I wanted to ask you a couple more questions before I get you to Saudi Arabia. Did you receive any cultural training?

Nicklaus: Yes, yeah.

DePue: What was the nature of that training?

Nicklaus: You know, what not to do, what's not acceptable in their culture. There would certainly be no alcohol there; there'd be no *Playboys* or anything like that, because this country is strictly Muslim, this is what the Muslims do, and we're going to respect their laws, we're going to respect their people, and yadda yadda yadda. And they come out with, "A Soldier's Guide to Saudi Arabia."

DePue: We're looking at the book here itself, then.

Nicklaus: Right.

DePue: Were there some do's and don't's that they told you that stick with you today, that you recall?

Nicklaus: Oh, not really. I know there were some hand gestures that weren't acceptable, like, "okay," that was something insulting to them. I really didn't like them people, to be perfectly honest with you.

DePue: "Those people" being the Saudis?

Nicklaus: The Arabs, yeah. None of the Arabs. They were very sneaky, very dirty—to me—the ones I met. But that's at the end of the story. Here's another one: "How to Fight Desert Shield." And the flags of different countries.

DePue: By November, December, there's an influx of huge numbers of soldiers from around the world, but especially from the United States. There was something like six hundred thousand Americans in the region. Now, a lot of that was Air Force and Navy.

Nicklaus: Mm, a lot of it was Army, too.

DePue: A lot of it was Army and Marines. So talk about departing from the United States and arriving in Saudi Arabia.

Nicklaus: Well, I pretty much talked about departing the United States. We flew into—it must have been King Fahd [International] Airport. Then they bused us over to—what's the name of that town? Khobar.

DePue: Khobar, Saudi Arabia?

Nicklaus: Mm-hmm. I'm pretty sure that's where we went to. They put us up at a place we called Khobar Towers, which was later the same location of where the Air Force guys were killed in an attack on that place. We had to hang around there for a few days until our ship finally got there, then we went to the port, offloaded the ship, got all our equipment, and got it all up and running. It wasn't too long after that that we started running missions. I know my platoon was sent to three different locations. I went to a place with about four or five or six trucks up to Jubayl, I think it was called. Jubayl?

DePue: How do you spell that?

Nicklaus: J-u-b-a-y-l, Al Jubayl. I thought it was Jubail. Jubayl. I know Ted took part of the platoon and went to an ammo site somewhere, and my senior squad leader took some of the platoon and went to another site.

DePue: In other words, by the nature of the unit that you had, typically the truck company would be divided into a lot of different missions and a lot of different locations?

Nicklaus: Correct. That's exactly correct. Very, very seldom did we run a platoon mission. Most missions were squad, maybe, at the largest. Sometimes there'd only be four or five tractors and trailers.

DePue: Why don't you tell us, then, how many trucks would be in a squad, how many trucks would be in a platoon, how many trucks were in the company?

Nicklaus: It was sixty-one 915 tractors in our company, one belonging to the maintenance guys and the other sixty divided among the three line platoons, so that's twenty tractors per platoon. Each tractor had two trailers, so we had 60 tractors—well, 61, but their tractor didn't get a trailer—so for the line platoons we had 60 tractors and 120 trailers. Two squads in a platoon.

DePue: So ten tractors per squad.

Nicklaus: Mm-hmm, exactly. Ten tractors per squad, two drivers per tractor, was the MTOE. Then you had a platoon sergeant. You had a platoon leader, platoon sergeant, and assistant platoon sergeant.

DePue: Did you go over in full strength?

Nicklaus: As best as I recall, we were at full strength, but it wasn't like they're doing now where they're—well, I'm sure you know, you wrote a book about it—you know, when they needed people—like when the 16th got mobilized for Iraqi Freedom and…what was the other one?

DePue: I don't know if they went to Kosovo. Or Afghanistan?

Nicklaus: No, I'm thinking… It's Iraqi Freedom. When they got mobilized, you know, they filled their ranks with eighty-eight mikes[9] from other transportation companies. We didn't do that, so maybe we weren't at 100 percent strength when we went over there, because I know we didn't have a lot of new faces.

DePue: Would it have been typical that you would oftentimes have trucks going down the road with only one driver in them?

Nicklaus: Yes, yeah. If it wasn't a long mission, then there was certainly just one driver in the tractor.

DePue: Okay. So it sounds like immediately after you received your tractors and your trailers, you guys were on the road performing missions.

[9] This is Military Occupational Specialty 88-M.

Nicklaus: Correct.

DePue: Were you assigned to any particular corps or division?

Nicklaus: Yes, we were. I'd have to look at my papers to tell you; the battle star we wore—yeah, that might work.

DePue: I think it was the 7th Corps. I don't know if the 18th Airborne Corps was there. (pause) We're looking at a map now of the actual combat operations that has all the various units assigned.

Nicklaus: I could show you the patch that I had, and maybe you could pick it up. I don't see it on here. Seventh Corps sounds right, but…

DePue: Seventh Corps would have been—

Nicklaus: [Speaking to a third person] Go up there and get one of them patches that I wore on my right shoulder. Got a sword on it or something like that.

DePue: And it's got Roman numerals on it.

Nicklaus: Well, this one don't, so it must not be 7th Corps.

DePue: Okay.

Nicklaus: I'll have her get one, and maybe we can recognize it.

DePue: So a long-haul truck company would not typically be as attached to a division or a lower-level unit?

Nicklaus: No, no.

DePue: I don't want to get bogged down in that; I just wanted to clarify it.

Nicklaus: No, no, no, no.

DePue: What was your impression of Saudi Arabia when you first got there?

Nicklaus: The time we went into Khobar, it seemed like it was somewhat—I won't say industrialized, but it was somewhat, you know—boy, what's the word I'm looking for there? It was modern to a point, although the restroom facilities in this Khobar Towers were lacking. And our mess halls were set up in the parking garages of this Khobar Towers. But all in all it didn't seem too bad until we actually got out on the missions, and started going into the desert with our missions, running these MSRs, main supply routes. Then we actually got to see the real country, if you will, of Saudi Arabia. They're all the same, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait; they all look about the same, just miles and miles and miles of sand and desert. Really no reason to do anything with it because

it's just wasted land, you know. Not wasted land, but the land can't be developed into anything.

DePue: Very sparsely populated, then?

Nicklaus: The towns were heavily populated. Once you get out of those, the desert was very little… We didn't see hardly any population out in the desert, no. Not until the war was over., and then all of a sudden the Bedouins and their sheep and their herds and their everything, started appearing. It was amazing. Like, I don't know where they went into hiding at, but we didn't see hardly any of them. Then when the war was over and it was declared over, then all of a sudden you run these missions and these guys are all over the place with their herds of sheep and their camels. They call them Bedouins. They live out in the desert, you know.

DePue: Living in tents.

Nicklaus: Yeah, yeah. They set up a tent, and then the next day, they pick up the tent and go somewhere and then set it up again for the next night.

DePue: What was the weather like when you first got there, when you were there?

Nicklaus: Well, we got there in January. I can remember certainly needing a field jacket, and I can remember it raining quite a bit, a lot of rain, and being cold at night. It warmed up probably in February, and it was dry; then you had the sandstorms where you just hunkered down until it was over with, then you brush all the sand off of you and your equipment and continue on. I don't remember it ever being ungodly hot, like they talk now about Iraq, you know; these guys are over there, 110, something like that with, all this equipment on. Of course, we didn't have all that equipment on either.

DePue: Well, you're also there, it sounds like, in their winter.

Nicklaus: Must have been. Certainly January was, the rainy time of the year.

DePue: Okay. The actual air offensive began—there is a couple ultimatum that the UN, specifically that George Bush gave the Iraqis, gave Saddam Hussein, to pull out of Kuwait, to withdraw, knowing full well that Saddam wasn't going to do that. The air offensive began January 17th. Do you remember that?

Nicklaus: Yes, I do. Yeah, I remember it very well. We were sitting in Jubayl with my trucks; we were picking up a load to take out to the desert for this unit—I don't remember what the unit was. But I remember that they came out and told us, "Make sure you have your protective mask with you,"—which we had anyway, and—"make sure you take those little white pills that they give you every day to take." We weren't told what they were, and finally we quit taking them because we were told that they probably weren't good for us. And they says, "The air war has started." So we said, Oh, okay. It didn't really affect us

too much in Saudi because, you know, all the air war was up in Iraq and up in that area, and we had to cross the berm to go into Iraq.

DePue: How far south was your location from the border with Kuwait and Iraq?

Nicklaus: Well, here's Jubayl.

DePue: Looking at a map here.

Nicklaus: And I believe this is the border of Kuwait.

DePue: So it looks like there—

Nicklaus: There's Kuwait right there, so…

DePue: —you're well south of the border.

Nicklaus: Well south of the border at that time. There's the border of Kuwait, and we're right there, so. These are the maps we had to work with, and these maps are not coordinate maps. As you can see, they're pilot maps, and degrees for latitude and longitude instead of having coordinates on there. The whole time I was over there, we never had a map that you could give coordinates on. Made it kind of tough, especially when you're sort of running out in the desert and you're trying to look for these—they had log bases set up—they called them log bases.

DePue: Short for logistics?

Nicklaus: Right. They had them set up out in the desert. They had several of them and they all had names. Now, don't ask me what the names are, because I don't remember. You probably should have interviewed two of us, and one of us could remember what the other one don't. (DePue laughs) But we would go out to these log bases; you just had to hit and miss sometimes because those maps weren't very accurate. But the locations were given to us like, "So many miles south of MSR," whatever the main supply route. Main supply routes also had names, so it might be main supply route Mark. So they'd say, "Okay, go fifty miles on MSR Mark and then go south thirty miles, and you'll run into log base Lori."

DePue: But you weren't given any coordinates to them.

Nicklaus: No, no, no, no coordinates because we didn't have a map that had coordinates.

DePue: Did you have GED or some kind of a global—

Nicklaus: Not at that time, no, unh-uh. I think we did a remarkable job of finding a lot of the places we had to deliver our load to for the simple fact that, you know, the way we've maneuvered ourselves around that country was pretty remarkable.

DePue: Do you recall seeing any aircraft going overhead?

Nicklaus: No.

DePue: You were too far behind the lines?

Nicklaus: At that time we were, yeah.

DePue: How about the Iraqi's response? It wasn't too long after that that the Iraqis started firing Scuds. [tactical ballistic missiles]

Nicklaus: Yeah, that was one thing that we certainly were alarmed about. They would blow the sirens for scud alerts; the sirens would go off quite frequently, and you would just try to find cover wherever you happened to be. Now, if you're out on a mission, out on the road, of course you don't hear no sirens.

But we always figured that a good target for the Scuds would be the MSRs. Those things were just crowded with vehicles. I mean, it wasn't like we would go down an MSR with a six-truck convoy and we'd be the only thing on that MSR. We would be one group of six trucks on that MSR, but there was just tons of traffic on them MSRs all the time. These ain't paved roads, you know; these are desert roads. I remember one time I was driving and the semis—the tractors that got the rearview mirror outside that hangs over—and there was another 915 coming this way, and I was going that way. You're just so close that our mirrors hit each other, and glass come flying inside the truck. That happened more often than not on a lot of our 915s.

DePue: So what were the roads constructed from?

Nicklaus: Sand. Just hard sand. Bulldozers took the soft sand off, and enough traffic runs up and down these MSRs that it's hard. The MSRs were one thing. They had a lot of little white trucks and stuff that the Arabs drove over there; they would just ride out in the desert and pass us guys and pull back in. It's not traffic control like you see in the United States.

DePue: I would think sandstorms for those kinds of roads would be a big problem.

Nicklaus: You just stopped. You know, if you couldn't see, then you'd have to stop.

DePue: Did the sand drift across the road oftentimes?

Nicklaus: I can't recall ever having an MSR closed because of sand coming across it, no.

DePue: So compare your experiences that you were doing now—running up and down the roads, going to all these log bases—with what you had done in Vietnam.

Nicklaus: (laughs) Other than the fact that they were both military operations, you're in a military uniform, and there's some degree of danger, they were as different as night and day. Obviously in Vietnam we were patrolling, patrolling, patrolling, and it was all done on foot. Very seldom did we ride, and if we rode on anything once in a while it might have been a tank or something. Over there, Desert Shield/Desert Storm, we were transportation, so we never ever humped anywhere for mission, of course. Our missions were to take your tractor, get it loaded with whatever it is you're going to carry, whether it be MREs, [Meals Ready to Eat] whether it be ammunition, or anything in between, and take it to this site, whether it be a log base or a unit or whatever. Certainly more mature than I was when I was in Vietnam. More responsibility, I guess, because I was a platoon sergeant. More aware, I think, of what was going on around me and with not only my peers, but also superiors. The experience was the same; the differences were unique. I don't know if that's a good way to say it or not.

DePue: Okay. By this time, you're getting close now. The air campaign has started. You're expecting that the ground campaign is going to start pretty quickly. What are you guys now being told about the enemy you face?

Nicklaus: Well, by that time we'd moved out to the desert, and we'd set up tents out there. We still had the scud alerts. We really didn't know what our role was going to be yet until they took two thirds of our assets and our company personnel and they left one third behind at our CP, [Command Post] our compound, out in the desert. The other two thirds of us loaded all of our trailers with all different types of ammunition to support the 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment who was going up into Iraq as a pinching movement, these guys here. And we rode behind them in our trucks with the trailers full of ammunition.

DePue: So now you're going to be going behind the front lines but going forward into Iraq, then?

Nicklaus: Mm-hmm, right, and the idea was the 2nd ACR [Armored Cavalry Regiment] would run into all kinds of firefights or whatnot and they would need to be resupplied immediately; we were a moving ammunition supply, was what we were.

DePue: That was your particular platoon?

Nicklaus: That was our company.

DePue: The entire company now?

Nicklaus: Two thirds of the company. They used two thirds of our assets and left one third back in our compound in Saudi, in the desert. So they took two platoon sergeants, left one platoon sergeant back. I was one of the platoon sergeants

that went. Ted stayed back in the compound. They left two assistant platoon sergeants back.

But anyway, while we were following the 2nd ACR into Iraq, you cross the berm. There's actually a berm that separates Saudi from Iraq. You cross the berm. We were constantly having heavy equipment vehicles latching onto our tractors and trailers and pulling them out of the sand because they get stuck and they couldn't move. So they'd pull them out, and away they'd go again.

DePue: So no longer do you have anything like an MSR that you'd been experiencing in Saudi.

Nicklaus: No, we're stretched out like on line, you know. We had a few columns, but most of it's on line, and we're just following the 2nd ACR. Wherever they go, that's where we go.

DePue: And you're not on any kind of a road network.

Nicklaus: No, no, no. As you can see, these guys come up over the berm and turned east, and that's what we did.

DePue: Were you able to follow the air campaign?

Nicklaus: No. I had no idea what was going on with the air campaign.

DePue: Didn't know if the air campaign was going well for you or not.

Nicklaus: No, no. We didn't know if the ground campaign was going well, once it started.

DePue: And again, your expectations going in there are, it's still going to be a bloody brawl with the Iraqis?

Nicklaus: That's what we were told to expect. Again, we thought, Good Lord, if we weren't targets before on these MSRs with the scuds and whatnot, then what kind of target are we going to make now with all these trailers full of anywhere from small rounds of ammunition to automatic weapons to helicopters to Bradleys, [tanks] you know, whatnot? Cavalry has a lot of firepower, and we had a lot of ammunition on the back of these trailers.

DePue: So what firepower did you have?

Nicklaus: Well, I was in my CUCV, so I didn't have any, but our trucks had everything. We had everything from, like I say, small arm M16 rounds to 203s to—

DePue: No, but what were the truck drivers armed with?

Nicklaus: M16s. M16s. (DePue laughs) That was our weapon. That was it, M16.[rifle]

DePue: So if something were to happen, what training did you get, and what were supposed to do if you were attacked?

Nicklaus: Well, if it was an ambush, you were supposed to ride through the ambush and get out of the kill zone. All this sounds good in theory. Fortunately we never had the opportunity—not the opportunity—fortunately we never had to experience what would happen because we never got into an ambush or a kill zone. These tanks and everything that they forewarned us about that the Republican Guard would be shooting at us and so forth, it never happened. But the theory was that you'd just ride through it, because we're not going to attack twenty Iraqi tanks with an M16 rifle and a 915 with a trailer full of ammunition. We weren't into suicide missions at that time.

DePue: But you had to feel pretty darn vulnerable driving across this sand.

Nicklaus: Very vulnerable, and then you're getting stuck on top of it. Out there in the desert, these trucks are getting stuck, and I'm riding around in my CUCV [Commercial Utility Cargo Vehicle] looking for a vehicle to pull this truck out; then the next truck gets stuck, I'm looking for another one.

DePue: A CUCV is essentially what?

Nicklaus: The Blazer.

DePue: A Chevy Blazer?

Nicklaus: Yeah, mm-hmm, yeah. That was our command and control vehicle for platoon sergeant. My platoon leader did not go with us up there; he stayed back.

DePue: Why did he stay back?

Nicklaus: Because the captain wanted one platoon leader and one platoon sergeant to stay back. We were 2nd Platoon, so he took him, and then the platoon sergeant from the 3rd Platoon stayed back, Sergeant McWain.

DePue: Did you run across any Iraqi civilians?

Nicklaus: Civilians? No. No, I don't recall seeing any civilians. I saw Iraqi dead along the route, but no civilians. Unh-uh.

DePue: Dead soldiers, I take it.

Nicklaus: Mm-hmm. Dead Iraqis, yeah.

DePue: What were your thoughts seeing that?

Nicklaus: It probably bothered my driver more than it did me. She was a female, and the first one she saw really shook her up. I said, "Hey, just drive on and forget it. There's nothing you can do about it. He's dead, and that's war." I won't say I was so callous that I was immune to it, but it certainly was not something I didn't expect to see. We saw wounded. We saw a lot of wounded.

DePue: A lot of Iraqi wounded?

Nicklaus: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

DePue: Were they just sitting alongside the…?

Nicklaus: No, no, no. When the 2nd ACR would stop, of course, we would pretty much catch up and then we would stop. Then we'd have to dismount and go up and have a, you know—even out there they like to have powwows, meetings. They brought the Iraqi wounded, of course, back to the rear where we were. And so that's how we saw them.

DePue: Well, we didn't mention before: February 23rd, I believe, is when the Iraqis ignited something like seven hundred oil wells in Kuwait so there's this huge smokescreen and your destruction of the ecology and everything, but it sounds like you were quite a ways west of all of that.

Nicklaus: At that time we were. We did not see the oil wells being burned at that time, but we did later.

DePue: Okay. February 24th, the ground war began, and that's what we've been talking about for the last few minutes. That was roughly a month after the air campaign had started. Did you get much sleep those first few days?

Nicklaus: During the ground war?

DePue: Yeah.

Nicklaus: No. No. It seemed like them guys just kept moving and moving and moving, whether it was daytime or nighttime. And nighttime it was hard, even though there were so many of us. It gets dark out there. It gets very dark (laughs) out there. It's almost like being in a three tiered jungle when there's no stars or moon or anything.

DePue: So this time of the month there was no moon?

Nicklaus: Yeah, it must have been, because I don't remember a moon. I remember it being very dark.

DePue: Did you actually see any combat, then?

Nicklaus: I never fired my rifle, not at any Iraqi, no. I didn't see any combat, no. I didn't see the 2nd ACR engage anything—not saying they didn't, but I never saw them engage anything.

DePue: Typically how far forward would the combat units have been from where you were located?

Nicklaus: I would say the 2nd ACR was probably maybe a klick [kilometer] away, a thousand yards.

DePue: So not that far.

Nicklaus: Not that far. Oh, we could hear. We could hear things.

DePue: Could you see the tanks and—

Nicklaus: But you couldn't even hear real well because our vehicles make a lot of noise too, and then you have the wind blowing all the time.

DePue: It lasted for four days.

Nicklaus: Lasted for four days—hundred-hour war. My kind of war. (laughter) Get it over with.

DePue: At what point in time did you realize, Man, this is going pretty well for the UN forces, for the Americans?

Nicklaus: When they came up to us—"they" being the 2nd ACR—and they had a forklift; they told us that we needed to pick like nine or eleven of our trailers and they were going to offload all the ammunition off of those trailers and store it right there in the desert floor, right in the middle of were to put our sideboards on them trailers because those tractors and trailers, they wanted them to be used to haul prisoners back to Saudi Arabia. And that's what they did. So we picked the tractors and trailers and the drivers, and they brought the prisoners back. They loaded them on the back of them forty-foot trailers with the sideboards on them, and them guys took off and hauled them back to Saudi Arabia, some big soccer fields out down there somewhere.

DePue: With your platoon's vehicles?

Nicklaus: Mm-hmm.

DePue: What was your impression of the POWs you saw?

Nicklaus: I didn't have a lot of interaction with them. I think I probably thought that the number of them was staggering, so I thought, Everything we heard about you guys must not have been real accurate. We had even heard that they were giving up in droves. You know, they were just throwing down their weapons

and walking—actually looking to surrender. They probably had a better life after they surrendered than they certainly did before, anyway. So I won't say I even had an opinion. They meant nothing to me, other than the fact that they're noncombatants now, so they ain't going to do me any harm. They just hadn't better try anything in the back of them trailers, because I instructed my drivers, "Hey, if these guys try anything, just turn around and shoot them." This is war, you know.

DePue: Where, roughly, were you, then, after those four days? Where was the unit—right in the middle of the desert?

Nicklaus: Well, yeah. I mean…

DePue: Again, we're looking at the map here.

Nicklaus: There's the 2nd ACR, and their penetration was probably about right to there, and we were behind them.

DePue: Okay. So we're talking about going straight north into Iraq and then, I don't know, maybe—

Nicklaus: Yeah, then turning east—

DePue: Taking a hard right and turning straight east, and you're heading towards Basra area by that time.

Nicklaus: Yeah. See, the idea was the Marines were going to land in Kuwait, and the Army were going to drive them this way, and then we were going to cut them off this way. That's the way I understood the battle plan. I wasn't in Schwarzkopf's—

DePue: (laughs) You weren't?

Nicklaus: —command center, but that's the way I understood the battle is supposed to go.

DePue: On the 28th, then, when the cessation of combat operations was declared by President Bush, did the unit just stay there for a couple of days?

Nicklaus: Pretty much. I think everybody was so surprised that it was over so quick. You know, they had no plans as far as to, Wow, this is over; now what do we do? Yeah, I think the hierarchy had to start going from one mode, the combat mode, to, Okay, now we got all these people out in the desert doing this. What are we going to do with them now? So we eventually went back and offloaded the trailers to where they wanted their ammunition. I'm not sure what the 2nd ACR did. Then we went back to where our compound was, out in the desert, the tents.

DePue: In Saudi Arabia.

Nicklaus: Well, actually, when we were in the support mode for the 2nd ACR, they had moved north across the berm and set up a compound in Iraq. So when we got done and got the ammunition offloaded, then we went back to the compound that was in Iraq.

DePue: What was the mood among the soldiers you were with, in your own view, about stopping the war before Saddam Hussein was out of office, before the Iraqi Army had been destroyed?

Nicklaus: I don't think our soldiers, including myself or any of the soldiers in my platoon that I talked with, had much of an opinion. We were of the opinion that we would do what we were told to do, ordered to do. What our country or what the politicians decided to do with Saddam Hussein and the rest of his army was up to them. If they went further into Baghdad, then so be it, that's what we would have to do. But obviously after a few days, it was certainly evident that we weren't going to do that.

DePue: Were you proud about that experience with the 1644th?

Nicklaus: Oh, absolutely. I think they did a super job. I think the soldiers—and I'm talking—you know, this is the first time I ever went to combat with male and female, and females certainly provided some unique problems to deal with, but all in all, I guarantee you, they performed very, very well. Very, very well. I'm very proud of all of them. Not a one of them that I know of had any problem.

DePue: Well, you mentioned that they had unique problems that they…

Nicklaus: Females?

DePue: Mm-hmm.

Nicklaus: Yeah. One time I got woke up—I won't say the soldier's name. She was an excellent soldier. She was just a super soldier. They woke me up, "Sergeant Nicklaus." "What?" It's like three o'clock in the morning. "So-and-so, I think she's having a miscarriage." Well, you know, if you're around a bunch of men, like I was in Vietnam, you're not going to have that problem. Not too many men I know have miscarriages. So I had to go back—

DePue: As I understand, you're not supposed to be deployed if you're pregnant.

Nicklaus: Well, I don't think she was very far along if she was pregnant whenever she—I don't know. I didn't ask a lot of questions. (DePue laughs) All I know is I had to get her from our compound in the middle of the night to one that I had a rough idea of where there was a hospital. I got her there, and the doctor said, "Yeah, she had a miscarriage. We're going to evacuate her." I said, "Fine.

Good luck to you." I have communicated with her since we've been home, and she's a great person. That was one of the problems, you know. But I want to make a point, that the women did just as good a job, they were just as good of soldiers as the men were, as a whole.

DePue: Did that surprise you?

Nicklaus: Yeah. Yeah, it did. Yeah. You know, when you're not used to being in integrated units… When I joined the Cav, in the Guard, that was all men; there was no women in the Cav. So we weren't transportation that long, and we had an integrated unit of men and women. But for a combat service support company, they did a good job.

DePue: Well, let me put you on the spot here. (Nicklaus laughs) Now there's discussion about integrating combat units, like the 106th Cav, like infantry, like armor, like artillery. Would you be in favor of that?

Nicklaus: If they came to Ed Nicklaus and said, "What do you think, Nicklaus?" I'd say (pause) if they were exceptional. I wouldn't just make a blatant statement and say no, but I would say that the female soldier would have to go through a rigorous routine before she would be allowed in my combat unit. I'll put it that way.

DePue: Okay. Let's hit something else that might be a sensitive point. You've got National Guard, you've got Reserve units, and you've got an awful lot of active duty [soldiers]. You're supporting an active duty armored cavalry regiment. What was the relationship like with the regulars?

Nicklaus: You know, that's a good question, because when we first got over there, it was like, there again, kind of a barrier was put up: Oh, you guys are just Guard, you guys are just Reserves. We're the real Army; we're the active guys, so you guys just kind of go over here and do whatever you're supposed to do and leave us alone. But I'll tell you what, after a while, there again, it was just everybody's either green or brown, whether you had your desert DCUs [Desert Combat Uniform] on or your greens. The separation between Guard, Reserve, and active disappeared, and everybody was just a soldier, a Marine, whatever; they had a job to do and everybody better pitch in and do it together. And they did. The active people accepted and received the Guard and Reserve people as we accepted and received them.

DePue: Why don't you tell me about the unit's return back to the States, then? Kind of walk us through step by step.

Nicklaus: Well, (laughs) you know, the ground war ended so quick that we swore we would be home by Easter. Easter came and went and we were still over there. The funny thing I told you about, before I get into the coming home, as soon as that war was over and we went back to our tent area—then I think we moved back to Saudi a short time later—but we ran missions up into Kuwait.

We ran several missions into Kuwait. We saw the road where all the destroyed vehicles were, and that's when we saw the burning oil wells. You could be riding along the MSR, it would be complete daylight and you could look five hundred meters or even a thousand meters in front of you, and it would just look like a wall of black. Then you rode into that, and that was all the burning oil well. You could see them burning.

DePue: Did you see all those vehicles along that route that were destroyed as well?

Nicklaus: Yes, yes, we certainly did. It was quite the devastation. Quite the devastation. It was just unbelievable what the Iraqis did on their way out, and then, of course, what we did on the way following them out.

DePue: Well, you're an old Marine, an old soldier, had plenty of combat. What are the emotions that you're feeling at that time, seeing the oil well, seeing that incredible destruction on that road going north from Kuwait?

Nicklaus: There again, I don't know if it was because of age or if it was just because of the experience I'd already had. The destruction of oil wells was to me very upsetting just from the standpoint of, what a waste. You know, what an idiotic thing to do. The devastation I saw along that road just reminded me, this is war. I'd seen plenty of World War II footage and it kind of reminded me of that. It's something we never saw in Vietnam because there was never any roads or something like that to see in Vietnam with that type of devastation. But it didn't bother me too much.

DePue: Okay. Okay, we were talking about coming back home.

Nicklaus: Ah, coming back home. So we thought we'd be home by Easter; that came and went. We thought we'd be home by first of May; that come and went. Well, finally, to make a long story short, the end of May we got on a Pan Am airplane. Well, I shouldn't say that. There's one other thing that I need to touch on here, and that is that we had to go to the wash rack and we had to wash the sand out of all of our tractors and our trailers. They had inspectors come by to make sure that all the sand was out of them, because they didn't want them being transported back to the United States with sand in them that would bring back all these microorganisms and bugs and whatnot. Well, I bet we was on that wash rack for seventy-two hours at least, night and day, doing nothing but washing vehicles. It was ridiculous, just utterly ridiculous.

DePue: That's an awful lot of water in a nation that has very, very little water.

Nicklaus: Saltwater.

DePue: That's what it was, saltwater?

Nicklaus: Yeah, yeah. Then one of the reasons we went up there to take stuff, Jubayl had a big—what do they call them?—dissemination?—where they take the salt out of the water?

DePue: Desalinization plant.

Nicklaus: Thank you, that's exactly what I was thinking of. Yeah, they had a big plant up there. Well, then the United States, you know, in all their wisdom, they brought a lot of water over there too. But it was just such a waste of time.

But anyway, now that I got that in, we got on an airplane, flew to Germany, took a little rest there. Got off the airplane, was only in the air terminal for about a half-hour, and got back on the airplane, and landed at Billy Mitchell Field again, on a warm May afternoon or morning—mid-afternoon, maybe—on May 28th or something like that.

DePue: May 28th is the official demobilization, so this would have been a few days before that, probably.

Nicklaus: A few days before that. We got off the plane. I got to see the family. Carol was there waiting for me. All the wives were there. And then we had to go back to Sheridan for demob [demobilization].

DePue: What was that moment like, getting off the plane and seeing the families there?

Nicklaus: It was great. You know, there was not only just the family, but there were a lot of civilian people there that were there to welcome us home. But I think probably the biggest heartwarming was when we came home from Sheridan to this community here. You know where Dixon is. We brought the interstate to Dixon, then we got off on Dixon and came in on Route 2. Well, Dixon had people lining the streets, and they welcomed us home. Then we came home to a big welcome home here. The buses stopped out at the old WalMart parking lot, we got out of the buses and jumped into convertibles, and the convertibles took us all the way over to Rock Falls, to the armory. The whole place was just lined with people welcoming us home. So it was, to say the least, quite in contrast to the way I came home from Vietnam, and it was very heartwarming, very heartwarming. I was very appreciative. I was very appreciative of it.

DePue: Make you feel like it was all worth the effort, the struggle to get over there and the sacrifice that you made?

Nicklaus: I thought it was worth it from the get-go. It didn't necessarily make it feel like it was worth it because I thought it was worth it anyway, but it certainly made me feel like we were appreciated for what we did. Our efforts didn't go unappreciated or unnoticed by the people here.

DePue: How do you explain the different reaction, the different response you got from the Vietnam era?

Nicklaus: That's a good question. I don't know if guilt's the word, if this was actually their first opportunity to welcome a returning army since Vietnam. I don't know if they welcomed Grenada veterans back or not. But in full force six hundred thousand Americans are coming home. I think the country had learned a lesson from Vietnam that, you know, if you don't like the war, then blame the leaders, don't blame the soldier who's fighting it. It's not our fault; we're just doing what we're told. I think they recognized that when we came home. And besides that, here we were triumphant, and in Vietnam, a lot of people think we weren't, although I disagree with that. **We** were triumphant, the politicians weren't, in Vietnam. But I think it was a combination of learning from Vietnam and the fact that we did what we were told to do.

And it had been a long time. This community—when you activate a National Guard unit, you're taking your neighbors, your neighbor's son, daughter. You know, these are people you all know. This isn't an outfit from Leonard Wood or from Fort Jackson; this is people in your community, people you live with and deal with every day. I think they were very appreciative of that fact that you guys took a lot of time out of your lives to go do this, and we really appreciate it. That's what I felt, anyway.

DePue: Compare, then, the experience or the feeling you had as a Marine versus the feeling you have coming home with this National Guard unit?

Nicklaus: Well, for one thing, you need to understand, even though I wasn't in the Marine Corps [in Kuwait]—I'm sure you've heard the saying, "Once a Marine, always a Marine." And we always felt—I know he felt the same way, and I know other Marines felt the same way, but I'll speak for myself—I always felt like I was still a Marine, just in the Army, a Marine in the Army. Not that I have anything against the people I served with because, like I said, they were great, and I would serve with most of them again, but I just always felt like a Marine. So to answer your question, What did it feel like coming home as a Marine from coming home in a National Guard, I still felt like a Marine coming home in the National Guard, (laughter) because I'm a Marine! Matter of fact, I think I told you the last time, the commandant said that everybody's a Marine; you're just in different stages of your life. No such thing as a former Marine, no such thing as an ex-Marine. Once a Marine, always a Marine, just in different stages of life. So that's what I was.

DePue: Very good. You stayed in for a few years after that, then?

Nicklaus: That was '91.

DePue: That was '91.

Nicklaus: We got activated again in '93. I was the first sergeant then at the 16th, and we got activated for the flood in Illinois. We went down to Quincy. We were there for three weeks. That was state active duty, so financially that wasn't very lucrative at that time.

DePue: Were you performing long-haul missions, or there were people filling sandbags?

Nicklaus: No, no. During the flood?

DePue: Yeah.

Nicklaus: No, we were sandbaggers. We weren't performing any missions, per se, with our tractors that I can recall. We had our soldiers in different towns along the river, and, like I said, we filled sandbags and did what we could do.

DePue: Is this the Mississippi or the Illinois River?

Nicklaus: The Mississippi. And then, oh, I don't know, somewhere along the line Colonel Vinson come down and said, "You're going to be my sergeant major of the"—

DePue: Lieutenant Colonel Rich Vinson?

Nicklaus: Mm-hmm. Lieutenant Colonel then; I think he retired a full bird. Sergeant Major Bowker was leaving, and he said, "You're going to be my new command sergeant major of the 1144th Trans Battalion," which a year later went to Iowa, and then we became the 1st of the 65th TCB. Vinson left and Morrow came in.

DePue: Ron Morrow.

Nicklaus: Ron Morrow. And then he left, and Purple came in.

DePue: Tom Purple.

Nicklaus: Yeah, (laughs) Tom Purple. Then I left.

DePue: What year did you retire, then?

Nicklaus: No, I left and came to Delavan, and that's when I became Command Sergeant Major of the new battalion standing up in Delavan at that time, 733rd Water Support Battalion. Then we became Quartermaster Battalion.

DePue: In other words, there was a lot of change going on in the National Guard at that time.

Nicklaus: Not really. There was just a new battalion standing up at Delavan, and thankfully I got the command sergeant major position of it. And I say

"thankfully" because I'd been driving down to Springfield, you know, for drills and ATs and all that stuff, ATAs. Remember ATAs?[10]

DePue: Mm-hmm.

Nicklaus: Yeah. So I'd been driving down there since I'd been promoted in, whenever, '98? 98? 96..

DePue: Promoted to sergeant major in '96?

Nicklaus: Yeah, '96. So then I've been driving down there from '96 until I think I moved to Delavan in 2001 or '02. Somewhere in there.

DePue: You were still in the Guard, then, when 9/11 occurred?

Nicklaus: Correct. Yes, I was. Yeah.

DePue: What was your reaction to hearing that news, especially still being in the National Guard?

Nicklaus: My reaction to 9/11 itself was anger. Probably anger was the biggest reaction. If you're asking was I thinking, Here we go again, we're going to be deployed, we're going to do this and that, I'm sure that was in the back of my mind; but being in this new stand-up battalion, I knew that we wouldn't be activated right away. But as far as the act itself and what happened in New York was just complete anger and disgust that our country could be attacked like that by such cowards. If you want to fight us, fight us. Put a uniform on and identify yourself and fight us. These terrorists, these Al Qaeda, these Taliban—I guess to a point they resemble some sort of fighting force, but most of them, they don't have uniforms, they don't represent a country. To me, we're fighting just a bunch of radicals. I won't get into that whole thing.

DePue: When did your military career finally come to an end?

Nicklaus: I retired. I think it was on June 1, 2004.

DePue: 2004.

Nicklaus: Yep.

DePue: How many total years of military service did you have at that time?

Nicklaus: That was, let's see, '82 to 2004, that's twenty-two years, and then four years active in the Marine Corps. Twenty-six years between the Marine Corps and the Guard and then three years of inactive reserve before I reached sixty and then retired.

[10] ATA: Additional Training Assembly

DePue: So you retired at age sixty?

Nicklaus: No, I retired at age 58; two months later I turned 59.

DePue: Okay. I know that in the National Guard, you don't start drawing your retirement pay until you're age sixty.

Nicklaus: Correct. That was very correct. (laughter)

DePue: I'm sure you appreciated it when you started seeing that retirement check arrive.

Nicklaus: Yeah, I had, what?, twelve, fourteen months waiting before I started receiving my pension.

DePue: Okay. Well, let's finish off with a few general comments or questions for you. Looking back at this long career, can you imagine yourself not having that military experience today?

Nicklaus: Oh, boy, I sure can't. No. You know what? I don't know if love is the word, but I think actually I loved it. I love this country, and I felt that the only way that I can really show my love for this country is to serve this country. Well, I'm not a politician, so I'm not going to serve it in Washington. I didn't want to serve it as a federal employee or a state employee. I wanted to do something, and to do it, you got to be in the military, I think. There's no better way to show your love for your country than being in the military and being willing to fight for it and in some cases even die for it. We've got men dying for it today. It's sad; it's sad. We had a Marine from Polo, we had a Marine from Byron, real close. Just last year, they both were sent home in caskets. It happens. But could I imagine my life without it? No. And would I do it again? Oh, I wish I could go back in right now. I'm sure you've heard the saying, "When you sign up, you wish you were in; when you're in, you wish you were out; and then when you get out, you wish you were back in." And that's how I feel. Boy, if I could go back in today and just take somebody's spot over there, some nineteen, twenty, twenty-one-year-old, I'd jump at it. What can you do for me? (laughter)

DePue: Oh, I'm not connected like that anymore. (laughter) Was it just love of country and desire to serve the country? Was there something about serving with other people who were dedicated to that cause as well?

Nicklaus: Well, I think they go hand-in-hand. Everything I did, I volunteered. I volunteered to join the Marine Corps; I volunteered to join the Guard. And the people that I served with were all volunteers. Well, we did start receiving some replacements over in Saudi; they were people that were called back from IRR

DePue: Inactive Reserve.

Nicklaus: Inactive Ready Reserve. Most of them left something to be desired, because they weren't there because they wanted to be. You know, they were there because they were ordered to be. But getting back to my original statement, 99 percent of the people I served with were volunteers, and so most of them were doing it for the same reason I was doing it. And, boy, just some of the greatest people you'd ever want to meet in the world, and some friendships that I wouldn't trade for anything.

DePue: Are you a different person for having had all this military experience?

Nicklaus: Well, it's kind of hard to answer because I don't know what type of person I'd be without it. I really don't know. Would I be a different person had I not done it? I think that certainly I wouldn't feel as fulfilled in my life if I hadn't had it. I'm very proud of what I did. You know as well as I do, you being in the Guard too--well, you were AGR [Active Guard Reserve]—but when you're juggling two careers at the same time, it's not easy; you got a full-time civilian job, then the higher the rank you go in the military, the more demands on your time for that.

DePue: You mean it wasn't just one weekend a month? (laughter)

Nicklaus: I can't remember the last time it was one weekend a month, I can tell you. But there's a lot of pride. I have a lot of pride in the fact that I was able to do that, and I have a lot of gratitude to the people I served with, and it was an honor to have been their sergeant major. And biggest and most, it was an honor to serve this country.

DePue: How many sons do you have?

Nicklaus: Three.

DePue: Did you have an opportunity at the point in their lives to advise them as to what they should do as far as military service?

Nicklaus: I never pushed any of them into joining the military. I let them all graduate from high school and choose their own path. One of them chose to go in the Marine Corps, the middle one. He served four years in the Marine Corps and did it honorably—yea for him—and he even tried a couple years in the Guard. It wasn't for him, and that's fine. The other two chose not to go in the military, and that's fine, too. They took a different path. It doesn't mean that I think any less of them, that's for sure.

DePue: Well, what advice would you give to people in general listening to this, to the kids or grandkids? What comments would you have to finish it?

Nicklaus: Well, I got a grandson who just enlisted in the Marine Corps a couple weeks ago, so he'll be going in, in October of this year, because he isn't any smarter than his dad or his grandpa. (laughter) But I'm mighty proud of him. What

advice would I give them? Boy. I think the advice I would give my country is I think that everyone should serve their country and the military, if nothing else, for at least two years. A lot of people say, well, we haven't had draft and all this and that stuff. If you don't love the country enough to do something for it, then, you know, maybe you should not be here. But then again, I got two sons who didn't serve. I know they love this country, and I wouldn't feel that way towards them personally. So I guess advice is, the military is a great career, it's a great place to fulfill a lot of your destiny if you have a destiny, but it's not for everybody. It isn't for everybody. There's a lot of people that I know in the outside, they're civilians, that I guess maybe what I said earlier about everybody doing two years, maybe that's not a good idea, because there's a lot of people I know in the civilian life, they'd have no business being in the military. So, hoorah. Semper Fi.[11]

DePue: Eddy, I've really appreciated the opportunity to talk to you, to hear your stories about Vietnam and today about what it was like in Desert Shield/Desert Storm, being in the Marines in Vietnam, being in the Army National Guard in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and Iraq. Any final comments for us when we close up?

Nicklaus: I thank you. I thank you for the opportunity to tell my story. I guess I'm sorry that my memory isn't as keen as it should be. I know I forget a lot of the facts and stuff that I should remember. But when you came to approach me, first of all I was against it because even though I've talked for probably six hours or five hours or whatever it is, I really don't like talking about myself or my experiences; I'd rather listen to somebody else talk about theirs. So thank you.

DePue: Well, it's important that we preserve these stories so other people can understand from your perspective, because it's a valuable perspective. Thank you very much, Eddy.

Nicklaus: Thank you.

(end of interview #2)

[11] Semper Fi: the Marine Corp motto meaning Always Faithful. The full form is Semper Fidelis.