Interview with James F. Perry, Jr.
VRV-A-L-2014-002
Interview # 1: December 29, 2014
Interviewer: Mark R. DePue

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DePue: Today is Wednesday, January 29, 2014. My name is Mark DePue, the director of oral history with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today I'm in Port Byron, Illinois, just outside of Rock Island, part of the Quad Cities area, and we're probably not more than about a quarter mile from the Mississippi River. I'm with James F. Perry, Jr., and I mention the junior, because Jim, we've interviewed your father, as well.

Perry: Yes you have.

DePue: World War II and Korean War veteran, he was a major in the Korean War and saw some hellacious experiences, if I can put it that way. We'll get to that, here in short order. But your interview today is about your experiences in the Vietnam War.

Perry: Right, correct.

DePue: I should mention, just very briefly here, how long have we known each other?

Perry: Oh, over twenty years.

DePue: How about 1981, I think.

Perry: Yeah, it's been quite a while. In fact, you worked for me at one point in time. (chuckles)

DePue: And still I came and talked to you anyway.

Perry: Absolutely. Brave man.

DePue: Let's start with when and where you were born.

Perry: I was born, November 12, 1946. I was born in Frankfort, Germany. I have the distinction of being the first American male born in Germany after World War II. My mother worked for the U. S. Consulate General, and my dad was a bright-eyed infantry captain, at that point in time. They met, and they hatched me over there.

DePue: So, they met in post-war Germany?

Perry: Yes, yes. My mother had worked down in the Canal Zone, down in Panama, and she spoke fluent German. So, when the end came in Europe for good old Adolf and his boys, they needed translators. She volunteered, and off she went.

DePue: When did she arrive in Germany?

Perry: Right shortly after the end of the war. I mean, she talked to me some about being in Paris and taking a train from Paris, over to Berlin. Obviously, Germany would have been rubbleized at that point. She had some tales to tell about that. Yeah, that's how she got to Berlin.

Marie Wagner, Jim's mother, at the time of her marriage to James Perry, Sr. in 1945. She worked for the American Consulate General in Frankfurt, immediately after the war.

DePue: What city was she in, when your parents met?

Perry: They were in Berlin.

DePue: Berlin?

Perry: Yeah, Dad was over with SHAPE [Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe], and he was working, evidently, as liaison to the Consulate General's office, as well. He used to tell me about some of the trips, that they would cross over into the Russian zone and have to deal with some of the Russian soldiers and their leadership. He wasn't real impressed with them. I'll put it that way.

DePue: What was your mother's maiden name?

Perry: Marie Elizabeth Wagner.

DePue: We've already mentioned that your father's name was James F. Perry, as well.

Perry: Correct.

DePue: You're not a third. What does the F stand for?

Perry: Franklin

DePue: Tell me a little bit more about your father, his personality and how he ended up where he ended up, at that time.

Perry: Over in Europe at that point?

DePue: Right.

Perry: Well, he'd been in an infantry division…Oh man, I think it was the 97th. They'd come into the war late in the war. I remember he told me their division liberated one of the concentration camps. He's told me a little bit about that. He was, I guess, just the typical American soldier at that point. He had graduated from high school. He'd gone through infantry OCS [Officer Candidate School] in the States, then division training, and they were deployed to Europe.

DePue: You mentioned he got the tail end of the war.

Perry: Pretty much.

DePue: Did he see any combat in World War II?

Perry: The division saw maybe a month, month and a half that he was in, so not a lot of combat at that point. However, occupation forces and those folks, it wasn't a real rose bed, because you had former German soldiers at that point that were still trying to kill our people off. It wasn't as peaceful as people would like to make it.

DePue: How would you describe your father's personality and character?

Perry: No nonsense; do your job; take care of yourself, a Christian man. I don't know what else you're looking for there.

DePue: What denomination?

Perry: Missouri Synod Lutheran.

DePue: How about the same for your mother? How would you describe her?

Perry: Mom was pretty hard-nosed, German heritage, didn't take any guff. Being an Army wife, she had to pretty much take care of the family when Dad was gone; Dad was gone quite a bit.

DePue: So he stayed in the Army?

Perry: Yes. Yeah, he spent twenty years on active duty. He retired; it would have been in 1963, down at Fort Bliss down in Texas.

DePue: So he missed the Vietnam War?

Perry: Yes.

DePue: Did your mom like being an Army wife?

Perry: No. I guess I answered that pretty quickly. Yes and no, a lot of good experiences, a lot of tough experiences. She always let it be known how difficult it was raising three kids, a lot by herself, moving every year and a half and that sort of thing, and having to be at the command performances with the generals' wives and those sorts of things that Army wives get to do, you know. Initially, it's kind of exciting, and then after a while, it becomes like, "Oh my Lord, I've got to do this again." So, yeah, that's kind of the way it was.

DePue: It wasn't what she thought she was signing up for?

Perry: No, no, I don't believe so.

DePue: You mentioned there were three of you. Obviously, you're the oldest.

Perry: I'm the eldest. I have a sister, Elizabeth and a sister, Catherine, and they're eight to nine years younger than I am. So I was raised pretty much as an only child for about nine, ten years.

DePue: Did your folks treat the girls a lot differently than you?

Perry: Much better than me. (laughs)

DePue: Much better?

Perry: Much.

DePue: In what respect? Were they not quite as no nonsense?

Perry: Well, they were given more latitude. There hadn't been a girl born to the Perry family for probably forty, fifty, sixty years, so my first sister was the first girl born into the family, so everybody thought she was pretty special. Elizabeth, Libby, is that sister.

Then my younger sister, she ended up with some asthma kinds of things, so with medical treatment and stuff she had to go through, she was always kind of the sickly one, and she learned how to use that to her advantage.

DePue: Did you think they were as special as the rest of the family did?

Perry: No, no, no. (both laugh)

DePue: Did you torment them?

Perry: Well, yes, but they were always in my business. They took special delight in getting their older brother in trouble whenever they could, and I gave them plenty of ammunition.

DePue: When did the family come back to the United States, after your dad was finished with occupation duty?

Perry: The first time? It would have been 1948.

DePue: Where did he go?

Perry: He went to Fort Lewis, Washington.

DePue: So, you're just barely two years old at the time?

Perry: Pretty much, yes, so I don't remember a whole lot about—

DePue: How long was the family there?

Perry: At Lewis? It would have had to been broken down, because Dad was with the 2nd Infantry Division, when they were mobilized and sent to the Korean War. That would have been November 1950. So, I suppose we were at Lewis for about two years, total.

DePue: Did you stay at Lewis when your dad went overseas?

Perry: No, when Dad left for Korea, my mother picked us up, and we went down to stay with one of her brothers. She came from a fairly large family. She had a brother who was a chicken rancher down in California, and we went and stayed with them, probably about four or five months. From there we went back to southern Illinois, my mother and I. She stayed out there [in California] for a while, and then we went back to southern Illinois, probably about six months later.

I remember it was winter time. The folks had a big old Oldsmobile at the time with a big rocket V-8 in it. I could climb all over the car and sit wherever I want and lay up, you know, under the back window and have a hell of a time. But I remember the snow, and I've often thought about Mom, a young woman at the time, hopping in the car in the middle of winter and heading to southern Illinois. I remember coming across the Rockies there. We hit some snowstorms that, even as a young kid, I still remember those storms after all these years.

DePue: Do you know where in southern Illinois?

Perry: My grandparents lived in Flora, Illinois, down by Effingham. Granddad worked for the B & O Railroad, a night switchman. He did that pretty much all his life, until he retired. I mean, he stayed with the B & O.

Grandpa had been in World War I. He was a former Marine and had been over with Pershing and the boys there. While he was there, he'd been gassed, and he had some lung damage. So, rather than working indoors, he preferred an outdoor type job.

DePue: Is that somebody you admired, growing up?

Perry: Yeah, Grandpa was a good guy. Yeah, he was a great guy. I remember, while Dad was in the Korean War, Sundays particularly, he [Grandpa] wasn't necessarily a church-going guy, but my grandmother was. She was Congregationalist. But we'd have dinner there, Sunday afternoons, and he'd always have me climb up on the lap, and he'd read me the comics. I always remember Pogo. The one comment that I always remember in Pogo is, "We've met the enemy, and he is us."

DePue: And you're reading this while your dad's over in the Korean War?

Perry: Yeah, yeah, yeah. (chuckles)

DePue: Speaking of that, you're still a very young child at that time. He got over there in 1950, late 1950, so you're barely four. I think he came back, from what he told me in our interview with him, about a year some later.

Perry: I asked him the other day how much time he spent in Korea. He said eighteen months. He was a little irritated, and I said, "What's the deal?" And he said, "Well, I was a fairly junior major, but I stayed an extra six months, because they promised me LTC [lieutenant colonel] as the battalion commander of the second of the ninth [2nd Battalion 9th Infantry Regiment]." And he said, "I didn't get it." And he didn't get promoted to lieutenant colonel until we were back in Germany, around 1958.

DePue: Well, I've had an opportunity to interview your father, as you know, and not too many people that I interview have earned two Silver Stars.

Perry: No.

DePue: What I want you to do—and this is obviously very second-hand—but walk me through, as you understand your father's experiences in the Korean War.

Perry: In the Korean War? Well, I was a bright kid, but I really didn't connect a lot, other than I knew Dad was in the war. He'd sent me some silk jacket from Korea that was all embroidered and really special. He sent one for me, and then I had a buddy Tommy, there in Flora. He sent one to Tommy, as well.

So, we'd go around town with our silk jackets on, so everybody knew Dad was in the war.

But it really didn't hit home as to what was going on, until, it would have been…It was in the wintertime, when we were down at Grandma's. I had no idea what action Dad would have been in at that time, with the 2nd Infantry Division, but we got a telegram saying that Dad was missing in action and was presumed killed. So, you know what that does to everybody. [It] kind of ruined the Sunday dinner; I know that much.

So it was about—I remember this—it was about two weeks later we got another telegram, telling us that he'd been found. He was alive and everything was fine. As a kid, that bothered me, yeah.

DePue: What was it that bothered you, that the initial message had been sent and was wrong?

Perry: Yeah. Well, just that your dad was killed. You know, you're going to lose your dad. Yeah, I guess that would be it, pretty much. When you're a little whippersnapper, you think your mom and dad are going to be around for a long time. All of a sudden, it's like, "Whoa, Dad's not going to be here."

Then Mom was so upset, and Grandma was upset. Everybody was so upset and wrapped in their own things that you're kind of a kid standing on the outside looking in, trying to figure out what's going on. So, yeah, I was…You learn to toughen up early.

DePue: Was your father the type—years afterwards, when you were spending time with him—that he would talk about his experiences in Korea?

Perry: No, never.

DePue: When did you find out about what he had gone through?

Perry: (Sighs) Dad and I, in my teenage years, kind of drew apart and grew apart. My sister, Libby, got married to my brother-in-law, Mark, down in Kansas City. She was at Kansas City Art Institute. This would have been 1976. I didn't know my uncles very well, but one of my uncles, Uncle Earl, was at the wedding for my sister. He showed up with my grandma.

After the rehearsal stuff at the church where Libby was going to be married, we went back to the hotel, and my uncle said, "Come on, let's go get a drink." Well, we go to the bar, and we sit down, and I'm having a beer. He's a former Marine also, so he's having a shot and a beer. I'm just a dumb Army captain at that point, and I said, "No, I'll just stick with my beer." But he started talking to me.

I remember him saying, "Do you know what your dad went through in the Korean War?" And I said, "No. I really have no idea." You know, Dad never talks about it. He never did talk about it, and even when I'd ask, he'd just ignore it. He wouldn't talk about it. And my uncle started telling me about when he [Dad] was overrun, up north, and some of the other engagements that he was in, with the 2nd Infantry Division, and when the division was pulled offline and had to be rebuilt from, basically, ground up and retrained. At that point, it dawned on me what was going on. I mean, I was an Army brat, so I knew Dad had a chest full of stuff on the Class A uniform, and I knew he had two Silver Stars and a Purple Heart and Bronze Stars.

DePue: Were you never curious enough to ask him?

Perry: The relationship just wasn't close enough. I don't know how to explain that. It was just a void. I believe my father had so many men, killed and injured, under him during the Korean War that when he came back from Korea, his total focus was on training his people, whoever they were, for combat. That was his total focus, and the family lost. Dad's attention was on his soldiers and his men, preparing for the next war.

DePue: Was your dad the type that would have talked to your mom about the experiences?

Perry: I remember, as a kid, when dad came back from Korea, Dad ended up as a Senior Army Advisor, up in Madison, Wisconsin, to an infantry. I don't know if he was regimental advisor; I believe that's what he was. And I remember Dad, at night, yelling and screaming and crying and carrying on at night. He'd wake me out of sound sleep. So, I mean, it was obviously post-traumatic stress stuff and nightmares. And I can remember, he and Mom in the bedroom. I was down the hall, but it was loud enough to wake me up, and it was a pretty big house. I mean, he was carrying a lot of stuff around in his knapsack.

DePue: Let me just to put some context into this because, again, I've had the opportunity to study a little bit about the Korean War and certainly interviewed your father. That first year of the war was a horrendous experience for the United States Army and the Marine Corps. Of course, it started with the invasion of South Korea in June of 1950. Ended up having the Pusan Perimeter.

Perry: Yep.

DePue: They broke out of the Pusan Perimeter, about September of 1950. The Inchon Landing was an important part of that, Inchon being much farther north, and then they drove the North Koreans north.

Perry: Way north.

DePue: Way north. And they made the decision…And this is a matter of history; it's certainly something worth studying about.

Perry: Politics.

DePue: The decision to enter North Korea. The Army was on the western part of the peninsula and the Marine's on the eastern part, were both driving, hell-bent, for the Yalu River, which was the border between North Korea and China, and basically we're ignoring threats from China.

Perry: Meanwhile, China says, "Don't do what you're doing."

DePue: China says, "Don't do what you're doing."

Perry: And we ignored.

DePue: Essentially, yeah. This is where Douglas MacArthur factors into it. We don't need to get too far into it, but it was right after Thanksgiving of 1950 that a huge offensive by the Chinese, both against the Marines and the Sixth Division on the eastern side of the peninsula and several divisions, to include the 2nd ID [Infantry Division] and the western side. And not more than a few days after that, the 2nd Infantry Division was entirely cut off, essentially surrounded.

For anybody interested in it, you can read about it in *Running the Gauntlet at Kunuri.* Your father, as I understand, was an operations officer in an infantry or artillery unit?

Perry: Infantry.

DePue: Infantry unit. That's one of the places he earned a Silver Star.

Perry: Correct, yeah. They were given a mission of clearing the ridges, to try to allow all those men that (chokes up) ended up being killed in that debacle [to withdraw]. I've since talked to Dad a little bit about it, and they were up on, I believe it was the western ridge, engaging the Chinese and shooting up machine gun nests and that sort of stuff.

You know, the thing about what I've read is they—they, being the leadership of the 2nd Division—really picked the wrong way out. There was another way that they could have gone, but they chose the wrong one. They didn't realize that Kunuri had been encompassed and circled on both sides.

DePue: This was probably very early in the timeframe that he was there.

Perry: Yes.

DePue: My understanding, having read about this and quite a bit of military history, this is every bit as harrowing as the Battle of the Bulge, if not more so.

Perry: Oh, absolutely. More so.

DePue: The cold was even colder.

Perry: I asked Dad how they kept equipment operable in those cold conditions. He said, "Well, we had to run the vehicles constantly." He told me that they were fighting for days and days in wind chills of twenty to thirty below zero. I've been in cold weather in the military, and I can't imagine trying to fight a withdrawal under pressure in those types of conditions. I can't fathom.

DePue: That was just the beginning of his eighteen months, in Korea. He earned another Silver Star, quite a few months later. But he was there during the timeframe that the line kept moving back and forth.

Most people's understanding of Korea was it was a stable line, close to the 38th parallel. It wasn't that way when he was there. When you found out about this from your uncle and first started to hear these stories, what were you thinking about your dad and about these stories?

Perry: Well, I thought I really had to reevaluate my whole thought process about Dad and what he'd done and why he had done what he had done with the family and Mom having to take care of things. I'd had some resentments, and I just had to go back and look and evaluate, as an older, mature person, and take a look at the misconceptions that I had.

DePue: Well, the irony is this is over a decade after he'd retired and several years after you'd gotten back from Vietnam.

Perry: Yes, yeah. We weren't close. When I left for Vietnam, when I flew out of the Quad Cities here, I didn't expect him to show up, but he was there, and I thought, "Wow," because we'd been knocking heads pretty good together for quite a while, more so me than him.

DePue: Did it change your relationship, finding out about that?

Perry: Yes, yeah, yeah. A great deal more respect, understanding what he went through and what motivated and what drove him and still drives him. I mean, he's pretty independent for ninety,

James Perry, Jr. and James Perry Senior, taken in the summer of 2004 in Port Byron, Illinois. The two were celebrating Jim senior's 83rd birthday. Olive, the family's English cocker, joined them.

ninety- two, ninety-three years old. You don't tell him much.

DePue: Is he still reluctant to talk about these things?

Perry: Yes.

DePue: What changed, where he was willing to talk about it with you?

Perry: Well, you did the interview, and that's probably the first time that he'd really sat down with anybody to talk about his experiences in the Korean War. After that interview, I started asking him, at different times, about things, and he'd let one or two little things out. That would lead to more things.

DePue: But even so, that's thirty years or so removed from when you first found out from your uncle.

Perry: Yeah, yeah. The family life, with my parents, was just strange. My wife, Linda, says she doesn't know how I ended up so normal. I said, "You think I'm normal," I said, "you ought to be inside my head." (both laugh)

Linda comes from a family like yours, where everybody worked together, and they were all on the same time, pushing and heading in the same direction. My mother had some emotional issues, God bless her, and those always weighed on the family. It just was difficult. It was difficult for her; it was difficult for the family.

DePue: You said, after your father came back from Korea, you guys ended up in Madison?

Perry: Yes, we were in Madison, Wisconsin.

DePue: Were you old enough at that time to remember the years in Madison?

Perry: Oh, yeah. I had a great time. We lived not too far from the college on the lake.

DePue: The University of Wisconsin.

Perry: Yes, University of Wisconsin. It was a big old house, up on top of a hill. [It] had a big backyard that went down to the lake. It had a private pier, and I fished all the time. I gave my mother a heart attack one day. I had an old inner tube…I was a good swimmer by this point. Obviously, you're on the lake all the time, you have to swim or sink.

But I'd been out ice fishing the year before. Dad took me to do wind sails, and [we] had gone out ice fishing, further out in the middle of the lake than where I could get from my pier. I was out with my inner tube one day. I don't know; [I] just thought it'd be a good idea to paddle out to the middle of the lake. Well, I did, and Mom came upstairs. She saw where I was. We had a

balcony on this house, and I'm way out where she can't get to me if the inner tube springs a leak. I'm playing around with seaweed and the little fish that are swimming around there. She kind of caught my attention, and she's yelling and screaming and waving her hands up there. She didn't look real big. I was out there pretty damned far, way too far. But anyway, I got back into the pier, after she said, "Get your butt back in here," and then I got my little bottom tanned real well, and I never did that again. (laughs)

That and the damned muskrat that was around the pier used to chase me out of certain areas. I went over to the muskrat's territory one day, and this damned rat attacked me, and I thought, Wow, this isn't good.

DePue: It sounds like you enjoyed these adventures you had.

Perry: Yeah, there was a little girl who lived up…She was the daughter to the editor of the *Madison*…I don't know what the paper was called. But she was my buddy, and we rode bikes and played. We must have been, I don't know, five or six, seven. But she passed away with, believe it would have been leukemia, while I was there. I remember my parents went to the funeral, but they didn't let me go into the funeral. They thought I was too young or whatever, and I've always kind of resented that.

DePue: It is interesting, they both would have seen plenty of death and destruction.

Perry: Yes, so maybe they were trying to protect me from death and destruction.

DePue: Preserve your innocence, maybe.

Perry: Oh, absolutely, what little I had even then. (both laugh)

DePue: What was the next move?

Perry: Well, when we were in Madison, we moved from this house near the college. Mom wanted, I guess, a new house, so they built a house in one of the new developments in Madison. We moved from that house…We probably stayed in that new house for about a year and a half.

Major Perry, Sr., Jim's father, while stationed in Madison, Wisconsin, when he worked as an advisor to both U.S. Army Reserve and National Guard soldiers.

During this time, my mother and father must have been going through some stressful periods in their marriage, because I remember, all the sudden, I'm down in Bettendorf, Iowa, going to school where Mom and I and the girls are living with my aunt and uncle, and nobody's talking about why we are there.

Meanwhile, Dad's still back up in

Madison as Senior Army Advisor. So something happened at that point in their marriage and their relationship. They obviously patched that up, and Mom and I and the girls, after school was out that year—it would have probably been 1955ish or '54—went back to Madison.

Then, in 1956, Dad received orders for Germany, and we went to Germany. Dad was stationed in Bad Kreuznach with the 2nd Armored Division. They're trainers; they're rear area stuff.

DePue: Is that northern Germany, or is that Volgerstr area?

Perry: No, we were around Mainz, Wiesbaden, Baumholder. Frankfort would have been on the west, so we were pretty far back.

DePue: Was the family…When you were growing up, were you guys church goers?

Perry: Yes, always went to church.

DePue: On post?

Perry: Sometimes, yes. Over in Germany, I remember Dad and I went to a Christmas Eve service when he was a Battalion Commander, at one of the chapels.

DePue: A protestant chapel, I would assume.

Perry: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

DePue: Which are generally non-denominational.

Perry: Non-denominational, yeah.

DePue: How about when you guys were living in Madison or back in the States in other places?

Perry: Yeah, Immanuel Lutheran Church, up in Madison. Dad was confirmed there, after the war. Dad had been raised Congregationalist, and Mom always wanted him to join the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church, so Dad went through adult confirmation there and was confirmed. But Dad's always been a church-going guy, except maybe his younger years. I don't know about that.

DePue: You must have been attending grade school and into junior high when you were in Germany?

Perry: Yes, in Bad Kreuznach, I was in like fourth-fifth or fifth-sixth. I don't know; it's hard to recollect. I wish I would have learned German. I wished I had been a better student and paid more attention to things, but I never learned German.

DePue: Were they trying to teach you German?

Perry: Well, they offered it. They taught German classes. We had American teachers who came over from the States and worked for the Federal Government in our schools, and we had a period of German instruction during the day and math and English and science, the normal stuff, and PE. We always had PE, physical ed.

I remember, one day we were out…I don't know, it must have been about [a] six or seven foot diameter rubber ball that we had. We had teams that we had chosen, and we were pushing [it] up and down on the soccer field. Whoever could get across the goal line won the game.

My dad's boss, who would have been a full Colonel, his son was on the same team that I was. The kid was wearing dad's rank, his father's rank, pretty much and telling me what to do. This had been going on for a couple of months. One day I'd had enough, out on the playground; I smacked the kid in the nose and bloodied his nose. Well, the kid didn't go into the school to tell anybody. The kid ran off, about a mile down to where his dad…where the soldiers worked on the caserne [military barracks] and went in and ratted me out for what I'd done.

Well, Dad got home that evening—I remember this—he said, "Colonel so and so called me into the office today, Jimmy." I said, "Yeah." He said, "What happened to his son?" I said, I told him; I said, "Well, here's what's going on. The kid was bossing me, ordering me around." I said, "I had enough of it, and I smacked him." Dad just kind of looked at me. He said, "Well, don't do that again, but good job." So, that was that. (both laugh) I guess violence was accepted in our family, as a means to solve problems.

DePue: How old were you at that time?

Perry: Oh, man, I would have been eleven years old, twelve.

DePue: At that time, did you have a decent relationship with your dad?

Perry: I was always kind of out there floating. I was just kind of out there. I was a kid that always did what I wanted to do, when I wanted. Mom was occupied with the girls. If I saw something I wanted to do, I'd go do it. I'd just wander off and do things. I mean, we had a bunch of kids like that on the…You know, American kids. We'd play baseball, or we'd play football, or we'd go for a hike, or we'd go get in a fight with all the German kids, who hated our guts. It was just building rapport with our allies. (both laugh)

DePue: So you had enough running buddies?

Perry: Oh, yeah, yeah.

DePue: But it sounds like this particular incident, you were fine with the way your dad dealt with that.

Perry: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: Did he stay in the Bad Kreuznach area of Germany?

Perry: We were there for a year and a half. Then, at the end of that period, he was transferred to Munich. He was in the 3rd Infantry Division at that point, and he became a mech [mechanized] infantry battalion commander.

DePue: So a lieutenant colonel by that time?

Perry: Yes, yes, he'd been promoted.

DePue: Was that his first battalion command?

Perry: I believe it would have been, yes.

DePue: Which is a big step for anybody who wants to make a career of the military.

Perry: Oh yes, yeah. A lot of Dad's friends from the Korean War had been riffed out of the service, reduction in force. I mean, all these guys that were in Korea, when they got back, they were board reviewed. If they didn't meet whatever the parameter qualifications were, they were reduced in rank from like major…I had a friend down in Texas whose dad had been a major, and he was reduced down to E6, just so he could finish his career at twenty years.

DePue: E6 being a staff sergeant.

Perry: A staff sergeant, yeah.

DePue: I bet you found out about that kind of stuff probably years later too.

Perry: Oh yeah, yeah. I didn't know. I was just fat, dumb and happy.

But Munich was kind of interesting. My school wasn't close. I was getting up at like 5:30 in the morning, catching the bus by like 6:15. The bus would come around through our caserne area, and then the American high school was forty miles away. I remember even then, our school bus was [an] OD school bus.

DePue: Olive drab.

Perry: Olive drab. But the windows were covered by fence, like a chain link fence on all the windows. If we'd been in a crash, we'd have never gotten out. But it was for the safety of the kids, people throwing rocks and any other terrorist sort of things that could go on then. That was always kind of something; as a kid I always thought, "Wait a minute. If we're the great rescuers of the German people, then why are we…?" But, you know, security makes sense, particularly for kids. So that's what that was about at the time.

DePue: But did you understand at another level why the German kids didn't like you?

Perry: Oh, yeah. We didn't like them, either. (laughs)

DePue: Because?

Perry: Just, we kicked butt in the war. That resentment was there, even in '56 and '57. That resentment fed down. Looking back at it, it's obvious to me that the resentment fed back down from their parents. I mean, how would you like to live in an occupied country?

In Munich we used to go hiking around, out in the fields. We were kind of, obviously, little hellions that really needed a lot of paddling, but my buddies and I, we'd spend the night together at somebody's place, sleeping out in the back yard. Then, in the morning, we'd hike off, out across an open field.

We probably hiked five or six miles, and we found an old ammunition dump, where they were getting rid of ammo from the war. Well, we were at that age, we were fascinated with German helmets and swords and sabers, anything we could find to collect. Well, we actually broke into the secured compound, and when I say secured… The first time we did it was in like December, and there was snow on the ground. We broke in, thinking we'd be able to find war memorabilia. We ended up breaking into bunkers filled with tank mines and found grenades. They had German guards over this, and they had damn German Shepherds there. That particular time that we did this, we're sneaking out, and the one guard saw us, and it's in Germany, you know, "Halt." We kept running our little butts off. He didn't release the dogs, thank God, but the guy actually shot at us, over our heads. I mean, you're eleven, twelve, thirteen years old…I remember specifically, there was a path we were going down, a rutted out path where they've obviously driven vehicles in. It was ice and water, but I remember diving in this and then crawling off into the bushes, so the guy didn't have a shot at me.

DePue: Now, you said he shot at you, and then you said he shot over your head.

Perry: Well, really, looking back at it, I remember hearing the bullets whizz. I mean, you don't forget that sound. But yeah, bullets were going overhead. How high, I don't know, but I wasn't going to get up and run.

Then another time, later that summer, we went into the same place. And if you're familiar with the German World War II infantry hand grenade, it's called the potato masher. You'd have to unscrew a cap off the handle, and the fuse igniter would appear. You'd have to pull that to set the charge off. We're out behind a housing addition, and we had two of these damn things. I thought, Wow, let's blow these up. It will be cool. So we were on one side of a concrete bunker. There was kind of a hillside, and we did what boys would do. We pulled the fuses and flipped the grenades over and a big boom, boom,

and we took off. In about five minutes or less, there were the MPs and people looking all over to see what the hell had gone on, looking at the holes that we put in the ground. We never went back after that. We decoded it's too dangerous to monkey around with this stuff.

DePue: This is in the height of the Cold War. There's probably no shortage of Hollywood versions of the Second World War coming out, and there were westerns on TV. Were you exposed to all of that, as well?

Perry: Well, in Germany, we didn't have TV. There was no TV. I'd gone from Howdy Doody and Clarabelle and all that stuff in the States. We got to Germany…We brought a TV over with us. Well, the first problem you have, you couldn't plug it into their outlets, because they run on a different cycle of electricity than we did in the States. So then you have to get a transformer to transform the stuff to the right cycle. Then you could plug it in, but then all you got was German TV or American shows with German dubs. So as a kid, it's like, what's the point in this?

DePue: No Armed Services Network?

Perry: Well, there was. And I had a little crystal radio. You know, the little diode thing. I had a radiator in my room, an old big radiator for heat, and at night what I would do as a kid, when I went to bed, I'd ground the crystal radio to get the power to my crystal radio. I'd listen to Armed Forces Radio at night. They had "The Shadow," "The Green Hornet," "Dick Tracy," "Abbott and Costello." I mean, all that stuff was right there. I'd listen to that, Jack Benny. I'd listen to that stuff at night. [My] parents thought I was asleep.

DePue: I would imagine though that stuff was left over from the late 1940s.

Perry: Oh, yeah, yeah, but it was all great stuff. I still love that stuff today.

DePue: When you were at this phase in your life, were you thinking "Yeah, this military stuff is good"?

Perry: No, no.

DePue: But you were doing all of this stuff.

Perry: Yeah, but that's just because you're in that environment. You learn about the environment' you're there with it. There were soldiers; there were infantry guys when we went to watch the movies at the caserne, at the army theater there.

We used to collect shoulder patches. We'd go over to clothing sales, where the seamstress was, and they'd let us come in on Saturday mornings. We could rummage through the patches that they'd taken off soldiers' uniforms. [They'd] be in a box, and if you found something you want, it's a

dime or whatever, or they'd give them to you. In fact, I've still got some of those patches downstairs today.

DePue: Any sense of what your parents thought you ought to do with your life, at **that** time?

Perry: No, no, no. My folks were happy if I just went to school and made Cs. (chuckles) They were just tickled to death.

DePue: Is that because you weren't making Cs or because they had low expectations of you?

Perry: Either/or. I hated school; I was bored in school. I was an outdoor kid, and sitting in a desk all day long… I'd be the perfect candidate for drugs today, if I were a kid in school, at that point.

DePue: But otherwise, everything you're describing about who you were at that stage of your life would have been great as somebody going into the military.

Perry: Oh yeah, yeah, but I didn't know it at the time. It was normal life. I didn't know civilian life; I just didn't know civilian life, other than the few episodes in Madison. But everything else was all military.

DePue: Well, we still haven't gotten past about thirteen years old. What happens next? Where'd your dad go next?

Perry: Well, I remember one day, over in Munich, he came in the house and said, "I'll see you in a couple of months or maybe sooner," and off he went with his battalion. They went somewhere down in the Mediterranean, I think…I know Lebanon was having troubles, and what is it? Crete down there, or one of those that's this dual Muslim…

DePue: Christian?

Perry: Yeah. So they were down there for that. That would have been during, I think, Eisenhower years, yeah, Eisenhower years. But he was gone for about two or three months. You know, Mom's muttering around the house "Damn it, I've got to raise these kids all by myself. Your father's always gone" kind of a thing. It's like, you know, "Come on, Ma; that's his job."

DePue: Where did he get posted after Munich?

Perry: After Germany, we came back to the States. He'd had the family car shipped by boat, so the car was on the East Coast. We picked that up and drove down to southern Illinois to stay with my grandparents for a couple of weeks. Then we…in the middle of the summer, with no air conditioning, in the Chevy station wagon, headed off to El Paso, Texas. God was it hot, all the way down.

It was miserable. But he ended up down at the air defense school as an instructor, down at Fort Bliss in El Paso, Texas.

DePue: So what subject does an infantry officer teach, down at the air defense school?

Perry: He taught infantry tactics to the air defense types.

DePue: To the officers going through basic and AIT [Advanced Individual Training]?

Perry: Yeah, yeah, yes, officers in the advance course, I think, was down there.

DePue: And that's at Fort Bliss?

Perry: Correct.

DePue: After you got over it being a little bit hotter than you're used to, what did you think of Fort Bliss?

Perry: Oh, I loved El Paso. In fact, I'm considering moving back to that part of the world right now, maybe not El Paso, but Alamogordo or Las Cruses, or maybe over by Fort Sill on the Texas side of the river.

DePue: To get away from the cold, since it's like five degrees outside today?

Perry: Yeah. It's been thirty below wind chills here and tons of snow. I'm sick of the cold. The body's too old. I went to Urban High School in El Paso, Texas.

DePue: This is a public school?

Perry: It's a public school.

DePue: This was your first exposure, was it?

Perry: Yeah, I started in eighth grade and went through senior in high school. During that period, about '62, I think it was, Dad was reassigned to Fort Carson, the 4th Infantry Division, as they were preparing to go to Vietnam. He was a battalion commander at that point. But we stayed in El Paso.

One of the reasons was so I could finish high school and not have to get yanked out midway. But to be honest, it wouldn't have made any difference to me. I could have adapted to a new high school fairly easy and would have had more fun.

DePue: You mentioned your dad, around 1964, went to Fort Carson?

Perry: No, it would have been '62, '61, '62, somewhere in there.

DePue: I don't want to get too much in the weeds on this, but that would have been prior to the time that any major line combat units were going to Nam.

Perry: Yeah, yeah. I could have that wrong. You're right; I could have that wrong.

DePue: That really started about '65. We had troops there but not line units.

Perry: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: So he went up to Fort Carson for some reason.

Perry: Yeah, he was up there and an infantry, but he was reassigned as an infantry battalion commander.

DePue: Tell me more about your experiences in high school, because this is your first exposure to a public school, isn't it?

Perry: Well, other than the military public, but yeah, yeah. Eighth grade started off; I didn't like it, (chuckles) and freshman year, I hated it more. As an army kid, you bounce from school to school, so one of the things that always frustrated me, I was either ahead in classes or behind in classes, trying to catch up or...And there was always some subject you were behind in, trying to catch up to the other kids, so you could be on the same sheet of music. That just totally frustrated me. Eighth and ninth grade, it was just trying to fit in, not only with your peer group, but particularly in ninth grade, you've got senior, junior. So you've got all that strata of peer pressure type things and fitting in.

The worst thing that happened to me, in ninth grade, I was thrown into a junior/senior speech class. When I got there, I came in late to do my scheduling. You know, you had so many core subjects, and then you had electives. Well, the way it worked out, my elective was speech. I hated it, and I didn't do well at it.

DePue: It's an elective, but you didn't elect it.

Perry: I didn't; my mother elected it for me. (both laugh) She thought it would round me out and help me. She was always trying to round me out and help me.

DePue: It doesn't sound like you were a shy kid or introverted.

Perry: Oh no, no, no, I was never introverted, no, no, no. I made friends; I get along well with people. I learned how to figure people out at an early age, because of being bounced around so much. There's plusses and minuses.

I had an experience that kind of turned me around in high school. I had a teacher by the name of Marcello; he was my geometry teacher. One day, he came up to me in class…This was early on in the year, he came up in class. It would have been in my sophomore year. He came up and cornered me after class. He said, "I want to see you after school." My immediate reaction was "What the hell did I do wrong now?" because that's just kind of how I thought at that point. I said, "Yes, sir, I'll be in."

So after school I went in to see him, and he said, "Mr. Perry, pull up a chair." And he sat down and talked to me like a Dutch uncle. He said, "You know, you're wasting your whole life here. You're so much smarter than what you're doing. I know you can do this work. You could run rings around most of these other people in this class," he said, "if you'd just apply yourself." He said, "You're smart; you're bright, and I really expect you to do better." He talked to me like a human being, instead of being talked down to. It was more adult to adult. I thought, Wow, Okay.

So that was an attitude adjustment for me, and it just started snowballing. I kind of figured out that getting fairly decent grades was better than getting stuff and getting yelled at when you got home for bringing in crummy grades, especially for deportment, acting up in class.

It was years later, probably about ten years ago, I was on the Internet with my old high school group, and I found out that this teacher had passed away. I started digging into this guy, and he had been in the Bataan Death March. Most of my teachers, down in El Paso, or a lot of them, in the early '60s were prior service military people, This guy had been a lieutenant in the death march and had survived it and gone into education. I thought, Wow, you know? In fact, down at Bliss, there's a building named after this guy. I saw that the other day. I thought, Man, how lucky I was to have a teacher like this. And [I] didn't even know it at the time.

DePue: Does that mean you stopped getting into trouble outside of the classroom?

Perry: No, no, no, no.

DePue: Did you start working harder at your grades?

Perry: I worked harder at grades and trying to apply myself more. Like I said, grades weren't a big thing at home; nobody pushed grades. Dad was gone during a lot of that period, when I was in school, so he wasn't there to oversee, and Mom had her hands full with the girls. It was just like—

DePue: Now you've described yourself something as a little bit of a handful. Were your sisters less trouble for your mom?

Perry: My sister Libby would have been. She was a smart kid and applied herself and did what she was told. My younger sister, she was sickly at that time, so there was a lot of stuff going on there.

DePue: Did you get involved in any extracurricular activities?

Perry: Honestly, no, I didn't. In high school, I did not. Well, I did junior ROTC, imagine that.

DePue: You just told me you weren't interested in the military.

Perry: Well, yeah, but that was an elective, and it seemed to fit. I knew the military, so it just seemed like a natural blend in. And you've got buddies that their dads are in the military, so yeah, we did junior ROTC.

DePue: What were your favorite subjects?

Perry: In school? I liked biology. I had a ton of math, not that I really liked it that much, but I was fairly decent in math. Physics, I liked physics. Chemistry was okay; you could make stink bombs in chemistry class, so that was kind of cool. (both laugh)

DePue: A nice, practical application.

Perry: An application for everything; you bet. El Paso was a wild town to grow up in, as a kid in the '60s.

DePue: How so?

Perry: Well, you had access to Juarez, Mexico. You had the rock 'n roll stuff starting. They were doing drug shakedowns in our high schools back in '63, '64. I didn't participate in that sort of stuff, but you could go out after a football game, and guys would go over to Juarez. You had to be careful though.

Dad got wind that we were doing this one time, and Dad said to me, "I want you to know, if you get over to Juarez, and you get in trouble, you guys are going to end up in a Mexican jail." And he said, "There's nobody here in the States that can help you." He told me about what happened to a couple of his soldiers that that had happened to. Basically, they'd get thrown in jail; they'd get robbed of all their clothes and everything else, their jewelry and watches and everything and rolled and beat up. And he said, "I'm telling you, if you get there and get in trouble, nobody's going to be able to help you."

DePue: What year did you graduate from high school?

Perry: 1964.

DePue: This would have been the early stage of the Beatles mania. Were you letting your hair grow a little bit longer at that time?

Perry: No, no, no, I was into the California stuff. I liked the Beach Boys and Jan and Dean and fast cars and four on the floor, and away we'd go. We drove fast.

DePue: When you were going to Juarez, was it looking for alcohol or what?

Perry: Well, yeah. We weren't there to buy souvenirs, (laughter) firecrackers, alcohol, the girly shows. We got bounced out of one of their bars one night, because it was a…I don't even know if I should say it. Four of my buddies

and I were there, and we sat through this show in an upper balcony. It was a female impersonator. What the female impersonator liked to do was go through her act and then drag a half drunk GI up there and then rip her top off, and there's nothing there. And all the sudden the guy realizes that it's a woman, and he's totally embarrassed. So, we were up—

DePue: A woman or a guy?

Perry: A soldier from the audience, from Bliss.

DePue: But a female impersonator would be a male.

Perry: Yeah, that's what it was on the stage. So, we sat through one round and had a couple of beers. The next go around, we're still up in the balcony, and she's doing another act, or he, whatever she is.

Anyway, we're yelling down to this GI, "Get off the stage. It's not a woman; it's a guy. Get off the stage. Get off." About that time, I had the biggest Mexican guy I've ever seen. Honest to God, the biggest…I mean, he was huge. He came up and picked up all four of us, took us down the steps and threw us out bodily in the street. He said, "Stay out of here," and we did.

DePue: Well, this is a peculiar question. Did he say that in English or Spanish?

Perry: He said it in very plain English. (laughs)

DePue: He'd had practice saying that before.

Perry: Yes, yes.

DePue: Were you working at the time?

Perry: Yeah. About my sophomore year in high school, I had a buddy; he got me a job where he was working selling shoes. We sold shoes together at—I forget the name of the place, but it was a name brand place—on weekends, on Saturdays. On Sundays, the stores were closed. But he left, and he got a job at Safeway, a grocery store near where I lived and went to school.

A couple of weeks after he had gone, he came by, and said, "Hey, you want to work over at Safeway with me?" I said, "Heck, yeah." He said, "Well, come on over." I talked to the manager and assistant manager and started working and worked, I don't know, twenty, twenty-five hours a week.

Dad pretty much told me, [at] the beginning of one school year…The new deal, at that point in time, was madras [plaid] shirts and button-down collars and Fruit of the Looms and Levis and penny loafers. Mom and Dad would buy you a standard issue for school, at the beginning of the year, which

was basically J. C. Penney's or Sears and Ked's sneakers and a couple of new shirts.

I said, "I don't want that stuff." Well, Dad was still around, and he said, "Look, this is what I'm buying you. If you want something else, you go get a job." So I went and got a job, best thing he ever did for me, because you had bosses back then that said, "The customer's always right, and we give you hours, and you better be here, or we'll give your hours to somebody else." I mean, that's where I learned, I really believe, a pretty good work ethic, from those folks at Safeway.

DePue: Now, you've been talking a lot about both of your parents. How would you describe your relationship at that point in your life?

Perry: I just went and did what I wanted to do. As long as I stayed out of trouble, didn't create problems for the family, behaved myself, went to church—I went through confirmation, you know—things were okay. I mean, we talked.

DePue: So it doesn't sound that much different than anybody else.

Perry: No, no. I didn't tell them a whole lot though. I kept my stuff to myself.

DePue: I'll put you on the spot.

Perry: Yeah, do it.

DePue: Which one of your parents would you most take after?

Perry: You know, I was thinking about that the other day, and honestly, it's not either/or; it's a combination of both. I'm hard-nosed. I've got a generous heart, and that comes from Dad and Mom both. The bad traits, I picked up from Mom. So, if you look at the good and bad traits, I'd say a lot of the stuff I have to fight [are] the Mom tapes that roll around in my head a lot. Not to say she was a bad person, because she could be very generous and giving and outgoing one day, but the next day could be, "Holy crap, who are you?"

I'll give you a for instance. One Christmas, after I'd been working, I bought her a Christmas gift. I'd gone to the PX [Post Exchange]. I had a military ID card, so I could go to the PX. So I went to the PX. I got her this sweater. It was a pullover with reindeer on it, black and white. I thought it was really cool, so I bought it and gave it to her. She opened the gift up and she threw it back at me. She pitched it back and said, "What are you getting me this for?" I thought, Holy crap. I never got her another thing after that. I thought, The hell with it, I'm not going through this kind of stuff.

To this day, I have no idea. She'd gone through a hysterectomy at this point in time, so her female hormones and everything had to have been, you know, whatever. But a kid that's a sophomore or junior in high school doesn't

understand that stuff. I was like, "Whoa, fine." So I gave the sweater to my girlfriend. (both laugh) How's that?

DePue: Did she like it?

Perry: And she loved it, as a matter of fact.

DePue: This is a timeframe when there are some other interesting things happening in the United States, especially for somebody who's paying a little bit of attention to the military. You're at Fort Bliss, Texas, home of the Air Defense Artillery School. Remember the Cuban Missile Crisis, October of '62?

Perry: Oh, Lord, do I, yeah. Biggs Air Force Base was in El Paso, which was near Bliss. We'd been following the crisis in school. Our history teacher was a vet, and every day we'd get little pieces of what's going on. More than anything, being Army kids, we all realized how bad it could get and what it would do to families and what it would do to our country. I mean, we were totally tuned in.

I remember sitting on the second floor—it would have been English class—and we had…the windows looked right towards Biggs Air Force Base. The afternoon was overcast, which is kind of unusual for El Paso, but it was just overcast and grey that day. All the sudden, all us kids in class were looking at the teacher. The teacher didn't see what was going on, but there were B-52 bombers, loaded up, lifting off on the runways, three at a time. There were about four or five of these lift-offs, separated by about ten to fifteen minutes. And every one of us thought, This was the end of the world, because we knew. We had Air Force kids in class too, so you swap stories about what your dads do, and what's going on.

Well, strategic air bases have nuclear missiles, I mean nuclear bombs. They were going to their assembly areas. They lifted off and went. We're like, "Now what the hell's going to happen?" because we also are smart enough to realize, where we're sitting, is going to be targeted by the Russians. So, you know, we're thinking, Hell, we're all dead. It was, Wow! As long as I live, I'll never forget that afternoon. Just totally frightening. The other day I won't forget, when I was down there, was the day [President John F.] Kennedy was killed.

DePue: November of '63.

Perry: And I remember I was in our cafeteria. It was my lunch break, and they came on the speakers. The first thing they told us was the president had been shot, and they'd taken him to Parkland Hospital. They didn't know the condition. And then, about half a hour later, they came on and said, "The president's been killed." It was weird the way school was that day, because everybody just sort of left. I mean, they didn't make a big announcement that you go home or whatever.

I remember walking home that day; I either rode my bike to school, or I walked to school until I got enough money to buy my first car. But I walked home that afternoon, and I was looking at the sky. I mean, it was just clear blue. It was the prettiest damn day. I mean, what had happened, man, I just couldn't think it through.

I remember the day of 9-11, here in Port Byron. When 9-11 happened, I went outside. There were no chemtrails in the air, no nothing. It was the prettiest bluest day, and I thought back to the day Kennedy got killed, down in Texas. It was the same kind of beautiful, sunny day, like this shouldn't happen on a day like this. But it just flipping right back to that.

We were out of school then for, I bet, the better part of five days. They had the president's funeral, and all that stuff was on TV, went through all that. It was really a downer for everybody in society. I mean, particularly being in Texas and having that happen in Texas.

I remember watching [Jack] Ruby, on TV, shoot [Lee Harvey] Oswald. And even then as a kid, I thought to myself, How did this guy get so close to this guy that he's got a pistol and able to shoot him in the gut and drop him? So anyway, I've always been kind of a conspiracy nut…or just a nut.

DePue: Just hearing you talk about the Cuban Missile Crisis… Of all places to be, the center of our missile center.

Perry: Yeah, yeah, because as a kid, from my high school, you'd walk out the front door, and we were close enough to see the trails and the launches of the Nike Zeuses and the Hercules and all that stuff up at White Sands. I mean, White Sands wasn't that far away, either.

DePue: This is the missile training center.

Perry: Yeah, yeah.

DePue: What did you think you wanted to do with the rest of your life, when you were in high school?

Perry: I had no idea.

DePue: You'd spent your entire life, up to this point, surrounded by the military.

Perry: Yeah, that's all I knew.

DePue: But that wasn't one of the options?

Perry: I didn't consider it. I mean, it was the summer of 1964. We're out running around, having a good time, doing parties, just ignoring life. I mean, the early '60s was wild and crazy.

DePue: Was it that you had no intention of ever going into the military, or you just weren't focused enough to think about it?

Perry: Wasn't focused. I was thinking about my girlfriend, my car, my job. I was going to Texas Western, promptly failing my classes there, because I had no business there. I was seventeen when I graduated from high school. I was just too damn immature for a lot of responsibility in places and things I was doing.

DePue: What did your parents want you to be doing?

Perry: Mom said to me one time, it would be nice if I'd become a pastor. I promptly laughed at that and said, "Nah, Mom. I don't have that kind of call. I don't see that as something I'm going to do." And I think Pastor Clausen—he was my pastor who confirmed me—reinforced that with my mother. (laughs)

DePue: When you were going to public school, down in El Paso, were you living on base?

Perry: No, no. We lived in El Paso, in an area called Milagros Hills, first. Dad bought a house there and then had a swimming pool built in the backyard. That was the biggest pain there ever was. It was nice to have a pool in Texas, but I ended up being pool boy and cleaning and changing filters and all that stuff. It was just a lot of work. But anyway, we stayed in that house for about two years.

Then the folks built a house on Pistachio Street in…I think Treehaven, is the subdivision. From the back yard it was desert, all the way up to the Franklin Mountains, at that point, to the White Sands Highway. We used to hike the mountains. [For] my extracurricular activities from school, my buddies and I'd go out rabbit hunting, quail hunting, hike the mountains.

Hiking the mountains got dangerous one day, because we got up in there, and that's where the weapons ranges were, for the Army. We got in behind them, where the safety officers couldn't see us. You know how far a seven six two round goes, a bullet round. We got behind that.

DePue: That's your standard rifle round.

Perry: Yeah, yeah, and the bullets, they're whizzing and bouncing. So we had to get down. There were big boulders there, and we crawled down in the boulders and got down below, so we didn't get… We were down there for about five or six hours. (laughs) I mean, it was like, oh boy. Then we started thinking about the rattlesnakes and the tarantulas. No, we were always out in the desert hiking, so I was physically fit.

DePue: Most people aren't aware of this, but El Paso is a pretty high elevation to begin with.

Perry: Oh, absolutely, yes.

DePue: Even before you get to the mountains.

Perry: Yeah, yeah it is.

DePue: Did you like the weather down there?

Perry: I loved it. Yeah, I enjoyed it. My friends, my high school, yeah, I liked El Paso. I guess it's changed. I still have friends down there. My one friend, Phil, I call him periodically. He said, "You wouldn't recognize where you lived, or where we lived." He said everything's gated; there's gangs. He said it's all gone. Gangs, it's just…you know.

DePue: So you had a gang, but it was a completely different gang?

Perry: Yeah, we were friendly guys. That's what gangs were; they were your buddies back then, a gang of buddies. It's not like today. We didn't carry heat. We didn't shoot people and didn't beat people up. We worked.

DePue: What did you do after you graduated? You already said you went to college for a little while.

Perry: [I] went to college down there for a while. Then my dad retired from the military while he was at Carson, and he came back to El Paso, because the folks had built the house. I think the plan would have been that they were going to live in El Paso. Dad ended up working for the Gallo Wine, Budweiser distributorship, down in El Paso. My mom's dad, during the Depression, had been a bootlegger, made bathroom gin, in the bathtub.

DePue: Did you know of it at that time?

Perry: No, I didn't know that. These are things that I learned later. (both laugh)

DePue: I didn't think any church-going woman's going to tell you about her dad.

Perry: But anyway, Grandpa, to get through the Depression, you know…Mom said she remembered guys coming to the back door, and fifty cents or twenty cents, you'd give them the booze.

So, anyway, Mom had a real darned dim view of working around alcohol and people who drank a lot and that sort of thing. She wasn't real enamored of Dad getting a job with the Gallo Distributorship and the Budweiser Distributorship.

I think it was really a mistake, because I believe, had Dad stayed where he was, with those people, he would have probably ended up being a millionaire, because the people that had the distributorship dealt with the post and the Air Force bases. The gentleman that hired Dad, Dad took me in to meet him one day, and the guy bought me a brand new suit. I mean, [he] liked Dad enough to take me out and have me tailor-fitted for the snazziest suit I've ever owned. It was a brown material with blue, in it, and it was cool.

But anyway, Mom and Dad argued a lot about his working for these people and the distributorship. He had to be out at night, checking bars and that sort of stuff, and she just hated that.

DePue: But it sounds like, from the time he went to Fort Carson, there were a couple of years that the two of them were living in two different cities entirely.

Perry: Yeah, yeah. So, as a seventeen year old, I can't wrap my head around much of this. To keep my sanity and to stay away from the family fighting, I went to work. I had friends, and I did other things, and I just stayed away, to keep from getting sucked into all this stuff. I didn't need it. Emotionally, I couldn't deal with half of it.

DePue: Does that mean that there was usually tension in the air when you were home?

Perry: There were always fights. I mean, there were fights. I remember, one Thanksgiving my mother chased my dad around the dining room table with a butcher knife, trying to stick him, and this is the formal dining room, with everything on the table. I remember, Dad used one of his Judo moves and came around behind her and got the knife away from her. But it was the mental stability stuff. That was going on all the time, stuff like that.

DePue: Was she getting any help at that time? Was there anything that was officially diagnosed?

Perry: No. She'd gone to William Beaumont General Hospital, the Army hospital there. She'd been there, but nothing that I knew of that was forthcoming. But I'm a seventeen year-old snot nosed kid, so they aren't going to talk to me about a lot of that stuff. So, it's like, okay. I decided then, I had my life; I'm going to live it. You people do what you want to do.

DePue: Well, 1964 is when you graduated. So you're in college for a few months. A lot of kids stayed in college, because there was also a draft if you happen to drop out.

Perry: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. You got your Selective Service card, and if you're in college, man, you weren't going.

DePue: And if you weren't in college.

Perry: Then, if you got married, you weren't going, so hey...

DePue: Well, let's take the next step in this narrative.

Perry: Alright, let's see. Mom raised so much hell with Dad about the job, that he finally said, "Okay, enough." He applied for the QUASIS [Quality Assurance Specialist Ammunition Surveillance] program, up here at the Rock Island Arsenal. It was an intern program, the ammunition management program at the Rock Island Arsenal.

DePue: QUASIS?

Perry: QUASIS. Don't ask me what it means.

DePue: Is that an acronym?

Perry: Yeah, it's Q-U-A-S-I-S, Quality assurance? But anyway, it's ammunition management. And he came up, up to the island. Mom had moved here earlier, and she was with my aunt again. So I was still in El Paso. Dad was still in El Paso. My buddies and I, we had an apartment. Oh, man, we had an apartment! It was kind of a Dew Drop Inn apartment, you know. Anyway, we had an apartment.

We'd had a beer party the night before. The keg was still in the bathtub, and there were drunk people everywhere, and Dad came in. He was leaving for Rock Island the next day. He sat me down and said, "You know, this really isn't what you ought to be doing with your life. Why don't you come on up to Rock Island, up to Iowa with us?" He said, "I'll get you through college, and you can settle down with your life then and figure out what you want to do."

So I agreed, said adios to my buddies. I had a '55 Buick, and Dad and I drove up to Grandma's in southern Illinois. Grandpa had died by this point. [We] spent some time with her, and then we drove up here. Mom and Dad found a house, a little place over the post office in Le Claire, Iowa. Mom was a fixer-upper type person. She fixed that place up, and then they moved out of that, and they moved to another place in Le Claire. I was sort of bouncing around with them. I was working at the Le Claire Jack and Jill, the grocery store in downtown Le Claire. They sold my car out from under me, so I had to walk to work. I was getting nowhere fast.

My uncle worked at J. I. Case, and I asked him if he could find me a job at J. I. Case. He said, "Well, I can ask around." He said, "It will be up to you to sell yourself." I think he greased the skids real well, because I went in to the personnel guy, and they hired me on as a laborer on the assembly line. I worked there for about a year, making more damn money than I'd ever seen.

DePue: Working on what?

Perry: We were putting Case tractors [together]. I was on sub-assembly, doing the picker stuff, and I could work piece rate. A buddy of mine from up in Iowa, he and I worked it. We could basically have our day done in four hours, if we pushed it. It was good money, hot.

DePue: Where was the factory?

Perry: In Bettendorf. It's where the riverboat gambling stuff is now. Still when we had jobs in America, Mark; we made things.

DePue: Part of the day when there was lots of heavy industry in the Quad Cities area.

Perry: Yeah, and you could go anywhere. When I moved up here, I could have quit Case anytime and walked over to John Deere and gotten on the next day, or Caterpillar. They were all here.

DePue: Everything was here.

Perry: IH [International Harvester], yeah. Now it's gone, except for Deere.

DePue: Were you union at the time?

Perry: I had to join the union, yeah. After my probation, you had to be a union member, so yeah.

DePue: Were you fine with that?

Perry: I was too dumb to know any different at that time. It bothered me that they were ripping me off for union dues. I didn't see I was getting any benefit for anything, but the older guys would drop a hunk of iron on you if you weren't a union member. (DePue laughs)

DePue: Was your father working at the arsenal then?

Perry: Yes. The intern program was run out of Savannah Arsenal, Army Depot. So, when he graduated from that, he didn't know where he was going to be in the world again. He could have been anywhere, because with his career path at that point, he could have been assigned to Korea or back to Germany or any number of places with ammunition. But fortunately I guess for him, he ended up here at Rock Island. He ended up managing the engineer ammunition. Bangalore torpedoes and that sort of stuff worldwide is what he ended up doing.

DePue: But he's no longer in the Army at that time.

Perry: No, no.

DePue: So a GS [General Schedule- pay schedule for civil service] employee?

Perry: He was GS, yeah.

DePue: Did you go back to school, as well?

Perry: Well, I tried school here, and again, I was—

DePue: Here being where?

Perry: Le Claire, Iowa. Once I got up here, I tried Le Claire.

DePue: What was the name of the school?

Perry: I went to Palmer Junior College. Palmer is the home of the chiropractic school, but they were opening a junior college. It wasn't what I thought was going to happen. I thought I was going to be coming up here, based on what Dad told me, and going over to the University of Iowa. That didn't materialize, because Mom and Dad just didn't have the money at that point. It was night school, so I was working during the days, driving back and forth, and I ended up dropping out. I said, "This is stupid." I just worked, worked and partied, go out on the river and catch fish.

DePue: What were you thinking about doing when you were in college? What were you going to do with all this education?

Perry: I wanted to go to dental school is what I thought.

DePue: Why dental school?

Perry: I wore braces as a kid, and thought, Well, that's something to do; it's a professional job. I can make some money, and that'd be cool.

DePue: We must be about 1965 by this time.

Perry: Yeah.

DePue: Vietnam is starting to warm up.

Perry: It's ripping. I've got friends from Le Claire that… You've heard of the A Shau Valley. I have a friend of mine who came home, during this timeframe when I was still running around over in Le Clair, Iowa. He came back from the 4th Infantry Division. He was older than we were, but when he came home, it was like, "Oh wow, what happened to you?" I mean, mentally, everything, he didn't want to be with anybody, nothing. That was my first exposure to the Nam situation, what was going on. He wouldn't talk about it.

DePue: Where were you, as far as the draft is concerned?

Perry: Well, let's see—

DePue: You probably were classified 1A.

Perry: Yeah, I was 1A. I was just bouncing along. I was working. They just didn't get me; I don't know.

DePue: What did they do, forget about you for a while?

Perry: I often thought it was because I moved around so much, they never caught up with me, so I don't know.

DePue: Where do we go next in the story?

Perry: Well, let's see, the next event—

DePue: How about this; who were you dating at the time?

Perry: Well, yes, that's where I was headed too. (DePue laughs) I met a very sweet young lady in Le Claire. I was the new kid out of town, new kid from Texas, and my uncle and aunt lived right across the alley from where they [the young lady's family] lived. My Uncle Fritz used to keep telling her, "Yeah, my nephew Jimmy's coming up here; he's quite the guy." Well, I got there, and she had eyes for me and snagged me.

DePue: What's her name?

Perry: Pam.

DePue: Pamela?

Perry: Pamela.

DePue: What was her last name?

Perry: Meinert, M-e-i-n-e-r-t. But she was still in high school; I was out. So she went to Bettendorf High School, and I was working. I'd drive her to school or pick her up from school. One thing led to another, and being a dumb kid, we ended up getting married early. She ended up pregnant before we were married, and it was like, "Okay, now what are you going to do? Now you've got to grow up."

DePue: When was this?

Perry: This would have been 1966. We got married in August. [Let's] see if I can remember the date, August 23...No, August 20, 1966.

DePue: So you've been up in Iowa, Bettendorf area, for about a year and a half or two years?

Perry: Yeah, thereabouts. Made a lot of friends, a lot of guys. Honestly, we were partying too hard, tearing up the streets, in and out of the country, not hurting people but just doing a lot of wild and crazy, reckless stuff. And to be totally honest, it was getting out of control. One afternoon I was over at Pam's house and my buddies, they were younger than I was. I was the only one of legal age at that point; I'd turned eighteen. They were still seventeen, but they worked for the Davenport Country Club.

DePue: We should say eighteen was the legal drinking age at that time. For hard liquor, for everything?

Perry: Yeah, beer. I think beer; that's all I'd drink. Anyway, they were having a big golf tournament at the country club. Two of the guys worked for the country club as caretakers. They knew…they'd set up and then leave all the liquor and everything out on the course at night. So they came up with the bright idea, we can go over and snag onto the beer, and then we can have a beer party out in the woods here a couple days later. Thank God I didn't go with them. I didn't go when they went to get the beer, but they went.

They came back by later that next day and found me. They had a trunk full of beer in the old Chevy, '63 Chevy. The trunks are really big. I mean, it was full of beer and pop and candy bars. Anyway, we thought we'd gotten away with it. We got all our friends together, and a couple of nights later we had a wiener roast and beer and pop and had a grand old time.

Le Claire's probably, I don't know, thirteen miles from Bettendorf. Well, we got done with the party, and we were all hungry. We were all too drunk to be driving. We drove into Bettendorf to Ross's, which is one of the old famous hamburger places. In fact, [President Barrack] Obama just went there not too long ago. It's being torn down now. The guy that owned it was an old Navy veteran, and he'd give you more grief and tell you what a bunch of dumb little turds you were, that you don't know anything. He'd been in World War II and Korea, and he'd opened this restaurant up. It was a burger joint. But he was more fun to be around, because he had stories, and it was just kind of a fun place.

Well, we'd gone in there for burgers; there was four of us. We got done with burgers, and we're still really too drunk to be driving. We stopped over at a filling station that was just right on the corner from the restaurant. The gas attendant—they still came out and pumped gas for you at that point—the gas attendant came out and pumped the gas that we got and saw in the back seat, all the beer and the crap that was in the backseat. We headed out of Bettendorf, going back to Le Claire.

When we left—I'm glad he did this—he called the Bettendorf Police Department. Before we got out of town, they picked us up, and we found ourselves in jail. We were in the Bettendorf jail that evening, and they

transferred us to the Davenport jail. In the Davenport jail it got more interesting, because there you're with the mother rapers and the father rapers. There were all sorts of bad people. We walked in, and we were cute looking little teenage boys. We all decided, we were sitting on the picnic benches out in front there, rather than getting in a cell, where anybody could grab on to us. We just sat on the picnic benches 'til the judge called for us, and we all got to go see the judge.

DePue: Here's you, I assume, blonde, blue-eyed.

Perry: Oh, yeah.

DePue: Probably looked more innocent than you were then?

Perry: Oh, yeah, yeah. Anyway, the judge got us all in his chambers that next day and said, "Okay, here are your fines. Here's what you've got to pay. And oh, by the way, I've had enough of you in Scott County, Iowa. You all need to join the service, because if you don't join the service, I'm going to send you to Eldora." Well, if you know what Eldora was, it was basically a juvenile reformatory, which probably would have been a good place for us in hindsight.

So, we all went home that afternoon, and then the next day we got together and drove into Davenport to see the recruiters. We joined the buddy system in the Army, where you joined together and you supposedly went through basic and AIT [Advanced Individual Training] together. It was a great deal for you. I qualified high enough to get into the… I joined three years; we all did. I was going to become a dental assistant in the Army. My buddies, one went engineers, and the other went straight leg infantry. The guy that went straight leg infantry never made it to Vietnam. (laughs) Figure that one. He went airborne and went to Vicenza, Italy for three years.

DePue: He won that lottery.

Perry: He won that one, big time.

DePue: There's a few strings here that I need to tie up.

Perry: Probably. Go ahead.

DePue: Were you already married at this time?

Perry: Well, it's kind of…I signed up.

DePue: What day was that?

Perry: I got married on the twentieth of August. I raised my right hand in Des Moines, Iowa, on the twenty-third of August. I was married three days before I left my bride for Fort Leonard Wood.

DePue: So, let's back up a little bit. Before you got married, what were your parents' reaction to—

Perry: The situation?

DePue: The situation.

Perry: Well, it was very interesting, because I knew what I needed to do, morally. I figured, I got my girlfriend pregnant, need to get married, need to do something, you know, do it the right way.

DePue: Let me ask you a really personal question.

Perry: Sure.

DePue: Did you love her?

Perry: Yeah, I did. But we were both too young to even understand what we were getting into.

So, I called my parents, because I wasn't living with them anymore. I said that I wanted to talk to them, and I wanted to bring Pam over. We went over to talk to my parents, because legally I wasn't old enough to get married in the State of Iowa or Illinois. I had to be like twenty-one or something. However, in Michigan, I could get married. So anyway, I'll get to that in a second.

I went and talked to Mom and Dad. I needed to get their permission. Dad was wavering, but Mom said absolutely not. So I said, "Okay, fine." So we left and went back to Pam's folks, her mom and dad, and talked and explained what happened. Her mother said to me—and her mom was a great gal—she said, "I know what we can do; we can go up to Michigan. You're both of age there. If you want to do this, we'll do it there." So that's what we do. The next day we drove up to Michigan and got hitched up there and then came back. Then two days later, I was gone.

DePue: What was your mother's objection?

Perry: I have no idea.

DePue: Did she not like or respect Pam?

Perry: No, because after I'd been in the service for a while, they got along well. In fact, my mother helped Pam get a job at the Rock Island Arsenal and started

her career in the federal service. I think it was more that I just wasn't paying any attention to what Mom was saying. She said, "I can deny this," and that's kind of what happened.

DePue: Was Pam along with this whole incident of getting the beer and having the cookout?

Perry: No, she saved me. No, she wasn't around for that. The afternoon that my buddies stopped by and wanted me to go help that evening, to steal the beer and stuff, she said, "No, you're not going."

DePue: That would have been like the day after you got married.

Perry: Yeah, but the incident happened…the break-in and stuff, where we got caught, happened like two weeks earlier. And she didn't know she was pregnant at that point.

DePue: All of that happened pretty quickly.

Perry: Oh, God, it was just like…I mean, my whole world turned upside down in a period of two weeks.

DePue: Here's the part that I'm still struggling to understand. You get married. Okay, you are very young, but normally you have some kind of honeymoon, and you spend a lot of time together, and like within a day or so your buddies have—

Perry: There was no honeymoon, no honeymoon.

DePue: …your buddies have convinced you to go drinking beer and having a party with them and leaving Pam at home?

Perry: No, that was before. All this happened prior to any of the marriage stuff, okay? No, I wasn't carousing around, drinking. No, no.

DePue: The day after you got married.

Perry: No, no, no, no, no. I didn't mean to leave that impression, no.

DePue: I'm glad I was nosey enough to clarify that.

Perry: That's good.

DePue: But the law caught up with you.

Perry: Yeah, they did, and off we went. Flew down to Fort Leonard Wood, got in a cattle truck, and drill sergeant started yelling. It was fun. And then the fight began.

DePue: Before this, you must have thought, "I wonder why they're not interested in me."

Perry: Who?

DePue: The Army.

Perry: Why they aren't interested in me? I never thought about it. Honestly, we were just out… I'll tell you, one of the things we did. One afternoon we were just bored and off of work, and there's a train down in Le Claire that had stopped along the tracks. We figured, well, we could hop the flatbed and be like Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer. We'll go up to Clinton. We'll get off there.

So I had one of my friends…I said, "Drive my car up; meet us up at Clinton. We're hopping the train. We're going to ride the train up." Well, lo and behold, we got to Clinton; the train didn't slow down. Now what do you do? So, we jumped. I mean, we were jumping in grass; you couldn't tell what was underneath it. I mean, it was high. It was later in the summer. How I'm alive to this day is beyond me. (both laugh)

DePue: By 1966 the Vietnam War is already seriously heating up. Were you paying any attention to what was going on in Nam?

Perry: Little or none. I knew the war was going on. You'd have friends in town; their number would come up; they'd be gone. Like I mentioned earlier, the one friend, the older guy that had returned, he was just totally different. But if you know anything about A Shau Valley, you know what the heck he went through. You knew it was bad. You knew you really didn't want to go, but you're young, and if it happens, it happens. You go and you do what you got to do.

DePue: This was a little bit early for this, but were you hearing any stories in the news about student protests or resistance or complaints or arguments about it?

Perry: No. No, not paying attention to that at all. I wasn't politically tuned in at that point in my life. I didn't pay attention to politics.

DePue: How would you describe yourself politically? Do you have no interest, just indifferent entirely?

Perry: I was indifferent; I didn't care. I didn't care, Democrat or Republican. When I went to high school, you got the normal propaganda about how Hoover was bad and the Democrats were good and how the great deal was a great thing. You just got…That's what you got. That was kind of my mindset.

DePue: Did your parents ever talk politics at home, growing up?

Perry: No. Dad being in the Army, no. It was never really talked about, at least not amongst where I was ever around.

DePue: Tell me about your induction physical. Do you remember that at all?

Perry: Yeah, I remember that. I'm trying to remember how it broke, because everything happened so doggone fast there. Shortly after we signed up in Davenport, they sent us up to…I think it was called Fort Des Moines. It wasn't Camp Dodge. I believe it was Fort Des Moines, and we did our physicals there. They ran us through on the yellow lines and the green lines. Follow these footsteps, bend over, look up your nose, look in your ears, and make sure you're physically fit. We all were, and we came back from that and we were here for…I want to say, it was like another week.

Then we got train tickets, through the recruiter, to go back to Des Moines. That's when they flew everybody down there. So what they must have been doing was, they'd bring people in until they got a flight or a cycle, down at Leonard Wood, that needed to be filled, and then they'd bring everybody in at once, from various points around the country.

DePue: So you went through basic training at Fort Leonard Wood?

Perry: Fort Leonard Wood. God, was that miserable. I still didn't have control of my mouth, completely. I still thought I knew more than other people, I guess.

DePue: More than the drill sergeants?

Perry: No, more than the mess sergeant. (chuckles) I was dining room orderly, and he wanted me to do something. I said, "I've already done it." Well, he didn't like that response. He said, "Well, you haven't done it to my satisfaction" or something to that effect. So, after everybody else was released from KP [kitchen police] that day, he kept me. And I got to clean out the grease traps.

Now, a grease trap isn't a little one by one little thing that collects grease. This grease trap had a metal door in the front, that you would open up. I'm six foot tall, and I could crawl my whole damn body inside of this dark, smelly spot. It was about maybe three foot high on the ground. This was all in the ground and connected to the sewage system. They don't want the grease going in the sewers, because it plugs things up. So, the new guy with the mouth got to go in and clean up.

Well, it happened to be about 110 degrees that day. It was in August. And the smells were just something that I'd never smelled in my life. It was like, "Oh God." So, you get sick to your stomach; well, you clean that up too. Cleaned everything up, got done with it, and I went back to my bunk.

The next day, one of the platoon sergeants came around to the people. When you go into basic, you take a battery of tests to see how bright or how

dull you are, and I scored well. They came around and said, "Would you be interested in going to OCS [Officer Candidate School], become a lieutenant?" Well, I'd been around in the Army long enough to know rank structures and what I thought might be a better rank structure than another, and I said, "Well, yeah, I might be interested in it." They said, "Well, from your scores, you've had a lot of math in high school, and you took math in college. We think you ought to go to Fort Sill to Field Artillery OCS."

I thought, "Okay." I started thinking, Well, I'm not sure. They said, "Well, we need to know now." I thought about the grease trap, and I thought, "You know, there's got to be a better way to get through the Army than three years of grease traps." So I said, "Yeah, I'll go."

DePue: Was this before you'd even completed the basic training?

Perry: I was still in basic training, yeah. So they tagged us, based on scores. My other two friends qualified for OCS, as well, that I was in [with] on the buddy system. They chose not to go; they said no.

DePue: By choosing OCS, did that extend the obligation you had?

Perry: After OCS, I had a two-year obligation. So the way it broke, it extended it a couple two, three months, not that much. When we graduated from basic, family came down; the wife came down. We got like a weekend off. Then I headed down to Fort Sill. I was put into what they call down there is an OCS prep battalion.

AIT [Advanced Individual Training] ran another eight or nine weeks; I don't remember exactly. But basically what the OCS prep battalion did was prepare you for the regimen in OCS. Well, it was just like a mini OCS. I mean, everything that happened in OCS—

Officer Candidate Perry successfully completed a punishment tour, earned while in OCS at Ft. Sill, OK in April, 1967. His OCS platoon carried the rock Perry holds back from a road march. Their Tactical Officer had to sleep with it, an OCS tradition.

DePue: Command basic training then?

Perry: No, it was like a mini OCS. All the square meal stuff, all the running, all the Jarks[1] up the hill, all the pushups, all the harassment, all the...I mean, it wasn't like a normal AIT, where they got schooling, and they had time off. We didn't get that. We were put

[1] During OCS, when the candidate earned too many demerits, he would have to run up MB4, a prominent hill at Fort Sill, in combat boots and M-14 rifle, within a limited time, as punishment.

under pressure, right off the bat.

DePue: In a normal AIT, Advance Individual Training, you're learning your particular specialty.

Perry: Specialty, which would have been…For us it was observation and gunnery, a forward observer and then figuring out fire direction control data. That's what we got in AIT. Only smart guys get into that stuff, as you well know.

DePue: And all that talk about going into the dental corps and doing that kind of work?

Perry: Went out the window. Well, I knew I was married; I had a kid. I needed to be able to support the family, and I thought, "Well heck, why not? What the heck. It makes more sense."

DePue: Where was Pam during this time?

Perry: She was back in Le Claire, and she was living with her parents. And through CHAMPUS [Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Uniformed Services], the baby, Cheryl Ann, was born. CHAMPUS picked up the whole bill.

DePue: CHAMPUS being the military medical system. At what point in the training was your daughter born?

Perry: Cheryl was born in March of '67. That was after I had completed the OCS prep AIT. I was held over; I didn't get into OCS right away. The reason I wasn't allowed into OCS right away is, when you go into OCS, they do a complete background investigation, and they ask if you've had any trouble with the law. Well obviously, I had.

So, I laid it all out to the investigators. Well, that means somebody comes back here and asks questions of judges and police departments. The judge was good to us. When he sent us off, he said, "If you do this, there'll be no record of any arrest or anything." And he kept his word, because when they came back and investigated this stuff, there was no record and came back perfectly clean. So then I was entered into OCS after that. But it was a period of almost three months that I waited. While I waited, I was assigned to a troop detachment down there, that was running 13B AIT.

DePue: 13B being your basic…

Perry: Cannoneer, yeah. So I was marching troops from point to point. I was kind of like a glorified babysitter and acting corporal or something at that point, just waiting for OCS. But Cheryl was born during that timeframe, and I did get an emergency leave of about five days to come back to see her and the family.

DePue: Were Pam and your daughter able to join you at OCS?

Perry: Not until I was an upper classman. You went through three phases in our OCS program.

DePue: Walk me through the OCS program.

Perry: It was roughly a twenty-three week program, where you were schooled on officer etiquette, tactics, gunnery, maintenance, all pertaining to artillery. It gave you common core subjects that you needed to know to be an effective artillery second lieutenant, physically and everything. The program turned out lots of good people. It was a strenuous, rigorous program. It was probably the toughest thing that I had experienced in life, at that point. It meant a lot to me to get through that, because you're with your buddies going through something and the team building and the bonding. The last thing you want to do is flunk out, so you had to maintain an academic score through there to graduate. Physically, you had to pass the PT tests and weapons qualifications and visual stuff.

DePue: Basic in AIT is normally what people look back on as their toughest period, especially basic training. You're AIT because you're getting all that discipline and structure and harassment and things like that. What was different about OCS that made it tougher from your perspective? Were you still getting that harassment?

Perry: Well, yeah, you were getting the harassment; you were getting…because the first phase of OCS, what they tried to do to us, was to get us to quit. They wanted to find the quitters, so they put the pressure on to force people out of the program.

DePue: What happens if you quit?

Perry: Well, you reverted back to enlisted, and you filled an MOS [Military Occupational Specialty] slot, wherever the Army needed you. We lost a bunch of people in that first eight-week period, and good riddance is all you could say, because they wouldn't have made it. They would have been more detrimental in a combat situation, had they been able to sneak through. So the Army system worked. It weeded them out.

Officer Candidate James Perry Jr., shortly after completing a 15 km map course/survival, escape and evasion exercise in July, 1967, while in OCS at Ft. Sill, Oklahoma. A member of 2nd Platoon of OCS Class 36B-67, Perry is in the platoon barracks.

DePue: Did you look at it that way at the time?

Perry: At the time, no, you were just hoping it wasn't you. I was doing everything I could humanly do to make it through that program. I think it's

the first time in my life that I was focused on a real goal and wanted to achieve it. So, it was a growing up period for me, more than one, yeah.

DePue: Does that mean that you were able to keep your mouth shut?

Perry: Yes. Yeah, I learned that, learned that very fast.

DePue: Sorry to be so blunt.

Perry: No, but yeah. You know me very well. (both laugh) So, anyway, Pam was able to move down to Oklahoma, down to Fort Sill, when I got to be upper class. That would have been like the sixteenth week of OCS.

Then you spent another eight weeks at what they called upper class or redbird. You got to wear a red tab on your shirt, walk around and drop other smacks around, make them to pushups and that sort of thing.

DePue: Did you like the academic, the scholarly aspects of it, because that was pretty tough?

Perry: It was tough. It was really difficult, because you were sleep deprived; you didn't get enough sleep. Personal time was limited. It just took a great deal of concentration. I had some of my gunnery classes after chow in the afternoon, and if you're tired and you've got a full stomach…I can remember many days going to the back of the class, just standing up, so I didn't miss understanding what was being talked about, because we didn't use computers back then. All our stuff was done on slide rules, on tabular firing tables.

They'd work us up from common area fire missions to met messages [weather data transmitted to artillery units in fixed formats] to precision registrations. You had to be able to do the stuff on exams. You had like an exam every week on what you'd covered. If you didn't pay attention, this stuff was… And it came so fast. You're expected to run a fire direction center in Vietnam.

They made no mistakes telling us we were going to Vietnam; that's where we were headed. Some lucky guys got Germany, but the bulk of us, we shipped to Vietnam.

DePue: You've been talking about gunnery, and I'll confess that I've gone through the same experience, so I know what you're talking about. But, for most people, they might think gunnery means you're going out to a range someplace to shoot a weapon. What's gunnery for the field artillery?

Perry: In the artillery, you're actually shooting targets that you can't see, that are miles and miles away. So, you have to have a set of eyes on a hilltop somewhere that can see the target. And they've got to determine information, directional information and distance information, that's sent back to the fire

direction control team. And, based on the type weapons system, like 105 howitzer or 155, you calculate that data, sent from the eyes or the forward observers to you, to determine that data. That data is then sent down to the individual cannons and set off on the cannons, and then it's fired. The rounds go out. More than likely, first round out, you're going to miss. The eyes adjust that data, they refine that data. So you're trying to get close enough to kill whatever you're shooting at, simplified.

DePue: Is that to say that this is, essentially, a series of mathematical problems?

Perry: Yes, absolutely, all the way through. When you're not hitting a target, it boils down to some sort of math issue that's gotten messed up.

DePue: Now, the three main areas, when I was going through this training, were learning how to be a forward observer, the guy who's up on the front lines watching this stuff land and adjusting it, what you've just been talking about; the gunnery stuff, working in a fire direction center; and also the gun line, working with the guns themselves. Did you get all three of those?

Perry: During OCS, yeah. We had weeks of each.

DePue: Which one did you seem to like the most, to take to the most?

Perry: I liked the gunnery. But, see, it was a combined process back then. Later on in my military career, they split out the observation teams, away from the gunnery, the people that determine the data. At that point in time, it was a combined, forward observer, gunnery system for teaching.

Down at Fort Sill, during OCS, they'd put us out on the ranges. We'd actually have the forward observer right there next to the gunnery team and compute all the data right there and then send it back down to the guns that were about a mile, mile and a half away. So it wasn't actually the way it would be for a unit situation, but for school training, that's the way they worked it.

DePue: Did you get some survey training, as well?

Perry: A little bit, not a lot, enough to figure out to take the fire out of the old lady and end it, know what DOL [Direction of Logistics] was and know what magnetic north is and how to use your aiming circle to apply the survey data that survey people leave for you. But that was what a lieutenant needed to know. You got that in basic.

DePue: You might want to explain very briefly what it meant to be taking the fire out of the old lady. Is that what the executive officer's doing?

Perry: Yeah. How do I put it? You know what I'm trying to say.

DePue: The term that comes to mind is that you're laying the battery, which, when you're talking to civilians, is laying the battery?

Perry: Laying the battery. You're getting the howitzers in position, where they need to be to be able to fire.

DePue: You're aligning all tubes parallel.

Perry: Tubes are parallel. Everything's parallel, so technically you can be on a common grid to mass fires.

DePue: I'm sorry to get so technical; I probably shouldn't do this. Did you learn anything about searchlights when you were in basic training?

Perry: No, not a thing, never even heard of them, other than I knew they were on tanks.

DePue: And how much of your mindset, the focus that you and the other students had, was because you knew where you were headed?

Perry: Oh, totally. At that point in time, I was paying a lot more attention to what was going on in Vietnam. We knew the rate that artillery lieutenants were being killed off, because an artillery lieutenant, as you well know…When you go out as a forward observer, you're with an infantry unit, and you've got a radio on your back, or your radio operator has it. There's a big long tall antenna, and the VC [Viet Cong] knew what the guys carrying the radio meant, because they were deathly afraid of artillery. The first thing they tried to kill off was the artillery guy, the lieutenant and the radio operator.

So yeah, we were going over as cannon fodder, we all figured. Then they'd tell us all these tales, "You get out in the field, and you'd be out there; you'll last seven seconds. That's the lifetime of a second lieutenant forward observer." Like, come on, but it scared you, made you pay attention.

DePue: Were you aware of the growing complaints and resistance, the counter war movement that was going on at the time?

Perry: A little more, but still, we were so focused on what we were learning; that was the overwhelming task. By the time you got done with the day, all you wanted to do was drop into your bunk and get five or six hours sleep and start the same cycle over again.

We were trapped. Trapped maybe isn't the right word, but we were not given any free time whatsoever, until probably about fourteen weeks into OCS was before we got our first task, which meant we could…For one Saturday night, we could get off post, go have a beer or go downtown to see a movie or whatever.

But, for that previous fourteen weeks, we were busy with Army stuff, twenty-four hours a day. I had a couple of nights where they just came in, rousted us up out of our bunks, made us put our wooden foot lockers on our back, take us downstairs and duck walk around the building, going, "quack, quack, quack," just for harassment. (both laugh)

DePue: That was before Pam came down, I assume.

Perry: Yeah, yes, yes.

DePue: What did she think about all of this?

Perry: Well, I think she was glad that I had kind of found myself and had something. I think she wanted me to stay in the Army.

DePue: Even at that stage?

Perry: Not so much at that point, but as she got around military life, I think she wanted that for me.

DePue: Did she think you were a better person because you joined up?

Perry: Oh, I'm sure. I'm sure, yeah. I was not boozing and running around and ripping crap up and getting in trouble. So, yeah. It impressed everybody after I graduated from OCS and went back home. They were like, "Wow, you're the same guy?" "Well, yeah."

DePue: So, you're much more serious, but you're learning about how to blow things up.

Perry: Yeah, oh, it was great, nothing like it. Time on target. (laughs)

DePue: Instead of finding some renegade hand grenades, German hand grenades.

Perry: Yeah, yeah, nothing like a time…I just moved up the scale on explosive power.

DePue: When did you get commissioned?

Perry: September 26, 1967.

DePue: And your first assignment after that?

Perry: I ended up in Service Battery of 2nd Battalion, 2nd Artillery, Old Deuce.

DePue: What was that unit's job?

Perry: We provided school support for OCS classes for AIT training for like forward observers going through AIT. We were a 105 Howitzer Battalion, three

batteries, Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, and had headquarters and then service. The reason I was assigned to service [was] I had applied for flight school in my last week of OCS; I'd qualified for flight school, and I was thinking I was going to be going down to Fort Rucker. Through the personnel system in the battalion, they understood that, so they put me over in Service Battery. I really wanted to be in a Firing Battery, but second lieutenants don't get to say where they're going; you just go.

DePue: What does a Service Battery do?

Perry: They provide maintenance and upkeep for the vehicles of the battalion and the howitzers, so they're in working order. Or else, when they come in for inspection, you get in real trouble when things don't work.

DePue: Did it include ammunition delivery at that time?

Perry: Yes, yeah, ammunition delivery was a big, big part of it. In fact, that was one of the lessons that the NCO [Non-Commissioned Officer] court taught me, as a second…and it was a valuable lesson. I had a platoon sergeant, Sergeant Pruitt. He was an SFC [Sargent First Class]. When I got to the platoon, he'd obviously had a lot of us brilliant OCS type lieutenants under his supervision, and he was my, really, my trainer. That's what the NCOs did; they trained us, surprising as that might sound.

People think, "Well, you've got all the education going through OCS." But you don't have a lot of common sense, hands-on experience. And when you come into a platoon sergeant's area… My first day when I met him, he said to me, "Well, lieutenant, this is my platoon. I run the platoon." He said, "I'll listen to you, all due respect, as a commissioned officer. But we need to be on the same sheet of music, and if I feel we're not on the same sheet of music, I'll be seeing the battery commander." "Okay, fine," I said, "Yeah, I understand that."

We were out delivering ammunition one day, and it wasn't Sergeant Pruitt, but by this point in time, he trusted my judgment. We're working; we're clicking very well together. He was over in one part of the field, and I'm at another part, probably about four or five miles away. We've got batteries spread all over that day, out in the field and on the ranges at Sill. It had rained recently, and down in Oklahoma they get some real gully washers. The soil is a sandy condition. We were late getting from the ammunition dump, where we'd loaded all the ammunition on the trucks, and getting it to the firing point, so they'd have ammunition to start the shoots for the school on time, because if you don't do that, then the battalion commander's getting a ring from the post commander saying, "What's going on? Why weren't you…?" And battalion commanders don't like calls from generals, that way. So, if you caused something like that, you were in trouble.

Well, we were running late that morning, and we had to drop ammunition off at another firing point. I could see it across the gully. We've got all terrain vehicles, and I said to the sergeant, I said, "Just drive straight across and drop the ammunition." And he started, "Well, I…" And I said, "I don't want to hear it; I don't have time for it. Just do what I told you." He says, "Yes, sir," gave me a salute, got in the truck, drove it about twenty-five, thirty feet. We had the truck stuck in sand and mud and water, and there's the ammunition, not at the firing point. I managed to delay shoot for an OCS class that morning.

When I got in out of the field that afternoon, I was referred to the command sergeant major, who talked to me for a bit. Then he escorted me in to see the battalion commander. The battalion commander told me, he said, "Look, you need to listen to your NCOs. When they're telling you something, you've got to listen." I said, "Yes, sir." And he said, "Don't ever do this again." I said, "No, sir, I won't." I never did, and I always listened. That's when I learned to really start listening to people, I think, rather than thinking I knew what was best.

And when I got to Vietnam, I had the same experience with my platoon sergeant there. He said, "This is my platoon. I don't know you lieutenant. No disrespect, but I'm running this platoon, and you're not going to come in here and make some dumb decision and get one of my people killed." I said, "Sergeant Morrison, I had this talk with Sergeant Pruitt about a year ago, roger, out." (laughs) But, thank God for good NCOs, because they train us, in soldiering.

DePue: What happened to the whole thing with wanting to be an aviator?

Perry: Well, like I said, I passed all the tests. I was waiting for orders for Rucker for a class. I had hard measles when I was a kid, and it went into the ear, my left ear. And I'd been around guns for a while. But long story short is that personnel, whoever was in charge of the school on the medical side, sent that back down. [It] said I'd had a hearing problem and that they needed a retest on my hearing exam.

So, we had an aviation facility at Fort Sill, and they sent me over there. I drove over, got into their little soundproof booth and took another hearing test, and they shipped that back. It turned out that I skipped high frequency bands that I missed, so that disqualified me from flight school. UHF radios, high frequency radios in helicopters, doesn't work well if you can't hear what they're saying to you.

DePue: At that time in your training, when you were going to a rifle range or you were on the artillery firing line, were you wearing any kind of hearing protection?

Perry: No, no. It wasn't issued; it wasn't mandatory; it was just tough it out, "Come on." You'd be John Wayne, you know. You've been around cannons. You're around that all day long, and they're going off next to the officer. You're up close and personal with it. You yank that lanyard, and it's a big boom, and that concussion works on the ears. I'm just grateful I've got the hearing I've got today. A lot of people don't.

DePue: How long were you in this Service Battery at Fort Sill?

Perry: Let's see, I got to—

DePue: Jim, you're being told in OCS, "You guys, you're are all heading to Vietnam," and you headed to Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

Perry: Yeah, I ended up at Fort Sill. I was there for a year, as all this stuff was processing through Rucker.

DePue: While things are really heating up, in terms of anti-war protest and all.

Perry: Oh, yeah, and hot stuff is starting to show up at Sill and places in the battalion. In my Service Battery, we had a guy that was trying to unionize the Army. He made the national press and everything. I forget the guy's name, but he was basically a communist. You just stayed away from this character. He was like an E-4 [U.S. Army Specialist 4]. He was just a malcontent, but he had all the legal stuff tied up, so everyone handled him with kid gloves.

I was there for a year. We always had the one big inspection every year, our annual IG [Inspection General]. Part of the idea is the battalion falls up. We were Class Ds, our "spiffy" uniforms. [We] had to do a review. After we got done with that, they'd get all the results and told people, the battalion commander and staff, how they did on the big inspection.

So, we got done; we were dismissed. I was headed to my car. One of my buddy lieutenants came up and said, "Ah crap." He said, "I got my orders for Vietnam." I just kind of chuckled at him and said, "Ah, better you than me." He just kind of smiled. "Go down to the club; we'll have a beer later on. We'll take the wives down, have dinner." He wanders off. About fifteen minutes later, he comes back over with the biggest grin on his face, and he says to me, "Guess what, Jim." I said, "What's that?" He said, "I flipped the orders over that I got, and guess whose name's on the back?" And I said, "You've got to be kidding me." He said, "Here's your copy." So, we were on the same set of orders to head out. I got a thirty day leave and then headed for Vietnam.

DePue: When did you ship out for Vietnam?

Perry: The first of September of 1968, which was at the end, wind down, of Tet of '68.

DePue: Do you remember hearing about Tet? You must have been at Sill at the time.

Perry: Had I not been held over from getting into OCS when I should have, that three month period, I would have gone to Vietnam early on in Tet. I had a bunch of people that I knew from that OCS prep class that got in to early OCS, a lot of them got killed, a lot of them, probably 30 percent of them.

DePue: Well, you're down at Fort Sill, and you're watching what's going on in the outside world, outside the gates of Fort Sill; things are really getting hot. We just talked about the Tet Offensive. I think it was April that Martin Luther King is assassinated. Remember that?

Perry: Yeah. The country went up in flames. I mean, everything burned, riots everywhere. You couldn't control it, once it started, and it had to go its cycle, but boy it was ugly. Army battalions everywhere, evidently, were alerted and mobilized. We got riot control training, which normally Federal Services don't do, because that's usually a National Guard training requirement.

They came in with special instructors for us for about a week, week and a half period, and we did all the riot control training, crowd control, all the formations. Then they took my battalion over to…They went down to Wichita Falls and loaded them up on planes and flew them to Washington, D.C. We were part of backup for the 82nd Airborne that was trying to put the riots down in Washington, D.C. It was nasty. Everything was burning. It was a bad time in our history. It was the closest I've ever seen America to coming apart at the seams.

DePue: That's just the beginning of that year. The next event, big one, was Robert Kennedy's assassination.

Perry: I was on the qualification range the day that he was shot.

DePue: That was in June.

Perry: Yeah, I was doing my weapons qualification with M-16. I didn't like the weapon, but I qualified with it. Anyway, I was living off post at the time and came in. As a lieutenant, I could take my personal vehicle out to the range. I was listening to the radio. I hadn't paid attention to the news the night before, but that next morning it said Robert Kennedy had been assassinated by Sirhan Sirhan, by a Muslim.

DePue: What'd you think when you heard that news?

Perry: I didn't know what to…Man, what's going on in our country? We're coming apart at the seams. Through the '60s, as you followed some of the stuff… [Let's] backtrack a minute. When I went through confirmation, at my Lutheran church—

DePue: This would have been in high school?

Perry: Yeah, this would have been in my sophomore year in high school. I was probably fourteen when I was confirmed, which means…When I professed faith in the church, it would mean all sorts of things. But, we also had a youth group in our church, teenage kids. I belonged to that, and it was a good thing. It helped keep me under control before I hit the wild streak.

But whoever was running the group would have guest speakers come in, and we had some guest speakers from the John Birch Society that came in and spoke to us about communism and falling from within. And Khrushchev [former Soviet Union leader Nikita Khrushchev] had made a big deal at the UN [United Nations] while I was in high school, beating his hand, the shoe, yammering about America collapsing from within.[2]

All those thoughts…I'm thinking, Are we headed to marshal law? As a young man, was there truth to all this stuff that they're…because it sure appeared so. I mean, you're getting leaders killed, right and left. You've had President Kennedy killed. Then you have Martin Luther King, and you had Robert; you'd had walls shot. There was all sorts of stuff going on inside. What's going on?

To me, looking back now at that period, that's when America started to change, when all that stuff was going on. So I don't know how to put it all together, even today. But that day that Robert Kennedy was killed, and I heard that on the radio, I thought, Man, this can't be. I said, There's just too many, too many coincidences, too many strange things happening, something bigger than somebody shooting. Something's going on here. I started connecting the dots.

DePue: It was about a month and a half later. Of course, Robert Kennedy was killed in California, right after he had won the California Democratic primary, it's August.

Perry: Same night they were celebrating it.

DePue: Yeah. August 1968.

Perry: How the guy got past security in there, through the kitchen, to do what he did, I'll never understand. But then—

[2]On his last full day at the 1960 Assembly meeting in New York City, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev took offense to the words of a delegate from the Philippines. What happened next has been debated, but William Taubman, author of *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era* writes that, after banging a table with both his fists, the Soviet leader took off his right shoe, waved it and then "banged it on the table, louder and louder, until everyone in the hall was watching and buzzing."
(http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1843506_1843505_1843496,00.html)

DePue: August sixty-eight in Chicago, Illinois, the Democratic convention, you've got the Democratic convention going on inside the hotel—

Perry: Guess who was headed to Vietnam when that was going on? I flew into Chicago, right during that timeframe.

DePue: And outside the convention center, the whole world's watching. Tell me about that experience.

Perry: Well, there was anarchy in the streets, if you want to call it that. The Chicago police weren't being easy on these people. They had the batons out and whacking them. They were fighting for the one park in Chicago. I forget what park it was.

DePue: Grant Park?

Perry: Yeah, that was it. They were going at it, tooth and nail. It was ugly. That was the exact time that of my ship date was to Vietnam, and I loaded…I'm in my Class Ds, my semi-dress uniform, here in the Quad Cities, flying into Chicago—

DePue: O'Hare?

Perry: O'Hare…to catch my flight to Travis for my flight to Hawaii and to Vietnam. And I'm telling you, you got into Chicago and it was like, "Oh man, why am I wearing this uniform?" There were crazies in the airport, just crazy people all over. It wasn't as bad in the airport. I don't mean to make it sound that way, but you could sense that people really didn't appreciate it. They called us baby burners and that sort of thing. That stuff was starting to blow up. People would look at you like, "Why didn't you go to Canada?" I don't know. But again, I'm focused on where I'm headed and what I'm going to be doing, and I'm thinking I'm going to be a forward observer with an infantry outfit. I'd kind of been forewarned I was going to be with 1st Cav [Cavalry Division].

DePue: With a life expectancy of—

Perry: Of seven seconds. (DePue chuckles) So that was my focus. In fact, I was so excited when I left…my wife and I drove to the airport, and her parents were there, and my dad showed up, like I said earlier. My mom was there, my aunt.

I was so excited about leaving, I took the house keys and car keys and put them in my pocket, didn't realize I had them until I got to California. To which I made a long distance call to my ex, and I said, "I'm sorry, I just found the keys in my pocket." I said, "I'll put them in the mail to you." She said, "Yeah, my dad had to break into the house." I said, "Well, I'm sorry. I just had my mind on other stuff."

DePue: Now, you just mentioned your ex. You were still married at that time.

Perry: I was married at that time, happily.

DePue: Happily married. And you probably thought your daughter was as cute as she could be.

Perry: Oh, yeah. She was a little bitty thing then. She wasn't big enough to talk or walk when I left. She was walking and talking when I got home.

DePue: Where were your sympathies, when you were in Chicago? Was it with the protesters or with the police?

Perry: With the police. Set them knuckleheads up good. I believed in what we were doing in Vietnam, and I just looked at those people as a bunch of damn cowards and rabble-rousers, people who didn't understand combat or war or anything else.

DePue: What were your feelings about draft dodgers and draft card burners?

Perry: I didn't care much for them either. No white carder ever gave me the okay to come home, if you want to know the truth.

DePue: We've been at this right at two and a half hours today.

Perry: Time flies.

DePue: And this is probably a logical place to break it up, so we can spend the next session talking about your experience in Vietnam. So we'll pick it up tomorrow morning.

Perry: All right.

(end of interview session #1)

Interview with James F. Perry, Jr.

VRV-A-L-2014-002

Interview # 2: January 30, 2014

Interviewer: Mark R. DePue

DePue: Today is Thursday, January 30, 2014. My name is Mark DePue, the director of oral history at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, and today is my second session with Jim Perry. Good morning, Jim.

Perry: Good morning, Mark.

DePue: We are here in his home, a very gracious host. It's cold outside again, plenty of snow on the ground, but we need to talk about some place that wasn't cold, at least when you were there. We left off yesterday with you just about ready to leave for Vietnam. So what I'd like to have you do is tell me again when you are heading to Vietnam and how you got there.

Perry: Basically, I flew from my home in Bettendorf, Iowa. We flew out of the Quad City Airport into Chicago O'Hare, and from Chicago O'Hare, we flew into Travis Air Force Base.

DePue: But I thought you were down at Fort Sill at the time.

Perry: No. I'm sorry if I left that impression. I had a thirty day leave, upon orders for Vietnam, to get my family settled and brought the family back, close to where her parents lived, so she would have family support while I was overseas. She worked for Amitech as keypunch operator in the area. We decided not to rent. We bought a mobile home, so I had her all set up, pretty well established, when I left. She was in the area, had friends and relatives, so I felt pretty comfortable that she'd be okay if an emergency came up.

DePue: How old was your daughter at the time you left?

Perry: She'd just started walking. Cheryl was born March 15 of 1967, and I left…It would have been September of '68, so eight, nine months I suppose, that range.

DePue: But a tough age to be leaving your daughter.

Perry: Very difficult, very difficult. She was a cute little kid, a little blonde-haired girl with a little birthmark on her cheek and just really a cute kid.

DePue: Smiling at daddy?

Perry: A pretty little girl, very difficult to leave.

DePue: And you flew from Travis?

Perry: Yeah. It was kind of funny, because you fly in individually, and all the sudden you're in a group of guys that are going to the same place. Everybody's kind of apprehensive and nervous. Some of the guys had been there on a couple of tours, so they would like to scare the bejesus out of you with some of the stories that they had from their first tour. So you get that adrenalin going that way. They load you on the plane, after you've waited and waited and waited, and we flew to—

DePue: Is this a military aircraft?

Perry: It's a civilian.

DePue: Stewardesses and the whole bit?

Perry: Yeah, the whole thing, LBJ's [President Lyndon B. Johnson] airlines. And off we went.

DePue: Did you know the unit you were heading to?

Perry: No. None of us did. We flew into Vietnam and went to a Repo Depot, a replacement company. There was one in the north and then one in our area, for the country. So I went into the southern one. We had the flight out of Travis. It's an eighteen hour flight, and it was like god-awful long, just unbelievable. But we flew into Honolulu first. I don't know, refuel, I guess.

But on the way to Honolulu, we had an engine go out in the plane. So we had a holdover in Hawaii. I don't know, it must have been about six or eight hours, while they replaced the engine. I met a National Guard captain. He was my seatmate. He'd volunteered from the Guard to go over to a specific unit. He had a specific unit assignment. We went into the bar, and we had a couple of Mai Tais and got to know one another. Then we flew on from there and talked during the rest of the like ten hour flight, slept, talked. [He was] really a sharp captain, a nice guy.

We landed in Okinawa. It was nighttime when we got there, and then from there we flew into South Vietnam. As we descended into southern Vietnam airspace, it was a gray, overcast day. In the horizon, looking out the window, you could see fires burning everywhere. It was unbelievable. There were too many fires and smoke clouds to even count, and this was towards the end of Tet of '68. Tet of '68 was quite the time in South Vietnam anyway.

DePue: Well, you said it was September of '68 that you went over. Tet was early January, early February.

Perry: Yeah, but when we were there for the campaign stars, whatever they put out, it was still considered part of the Tet Offensive when I got in there.

DePue: So still a time of very heavy combat?

Perry: Yeah, yeah, yeah. There was stuff going on.

DePue: The fires that you were seeing, were those fires from combat actions?

Perry: I don't know. They were probably burning manure, human manure, getting rid of it with the diesel smoke for all I know. (laughs) But when you're a kid coming in, a twenty year-old kid, you're thinking, Oh man, what am I getting myself into? I remember that thought. I'm thinking, Oh man, what am I doing here?

But I knew what I was doing there, and I was glad to be there. I thought I was doing the right thing and believed that I was doing the right thing and was eager to get on with the business of being a second lieutenant, Field Artilleryman, leader of men.

DePue: Were you one of those that was concerned or curious about how you'd respond to combat?

Perry: Oh, absolutely. I remember in high school, I had a very good English teacher; she was big on reading lists, and I remember reading *The Red Badge of Courage* about the Civil War. Yeah, so you always think, Under pressure, what am I going to do? Well, when you get under pressure and you're well-trained, you just react. That was the training I'd had at Sill.

DePue: Did you think at the time you had been well-prepared, well-trained for this?

Perry: Yes, yeah, absolutely. I knew my gunnery; I knew my FO, forward observer business, and I figured, Well, whatever comes my way, the good Lord's there, and he'll get me through this, or he won't. And that will be okay, too. It was one of those attitudes.

DePue: Now, you talked about, on the flight down, seeing Vietnam for the first time. On the ground itself, what's your first reaction, just your senses? What did they pick up?

Perry: (long sigh) We landed at Ton Son Nhut Air Base. No we didn't either; no, I'm sorry. We landed at Long Binh Air Force Base. I remember us getting out of the plane. The first thing that hit me were the smells and the heat and humidity. It was like, Man, this place stinks. I mean, the first (sniffing) deep breath of this, and it was like, whoa. It was hot, and it was sunny, and it was

bright, a lot of activity off the runways. You had F-4s lifting off, with full combat loads; there were helicopters. The intensity of action was fairly significant over what I'd seen at Fort Sill. You were in the Army, but it was like a different sense of purpose than, obviously, there would have been, because you're in a combat zone. It just made sense. People, they were moving on with business.

DePue: We finished yesterday with you talking about the experience in O'Hare Airport, at the very time that the Democratic convention was going on. You already mentioned that you were there, you thought, for the right reasons. Was everybody of that mindset?

Perry: Early on when I got there, yeah, pretty much so, because the guys that had been there for a while had just been through Tet. They'd fought off a major attack, and they won. So they were pretty pumped and proud of what they'd done. And the new guys coming in, yeah, I'd seen what I call now the dirt bags there in Chicago. You didn't think about that. You knew what you were there for, and you just went on with business.

After six or so, seven months of being in country, that's when I noticed a decline in morale and racial issues and increased drug usage among soldiers. And that's when the anti-war stuff from the states started coming in, because the new guys rotating in at that time were bringing stories in about what was going on at California, Haight-Ashbury and the protests in D. C. That's when morale started dropping.

We weren't really engaging the enemy full force at that point in time either. The peace talks were going on, so we were kind of playing a tit for tat. It was before the Cambodian invasion, and we were just kind of in a holding status. You'd take a hill, or an infantry unit would do a sweep. That part of it wasn't what I thought it was going to be. Not to say there wasn't combat activity going on daily. There was, but it just wasn't as intense as, say, like Dad in the Korean War or World War II. It was a definite difference.

DePue: We're going to come back to these things a little bit later, but I want to get you at least talking about some of the combat operations. We've got to start with, you arrive—

Perry: Let me tell you how I ended up with the battalion that I ended up with. The captain that I met on the flight over, we went into the Repo Depot, and he came up to me before he left for his assignment. He said, "How would you like to come over to my battalion?" He said, "I can get you over there. I can get orders cut and have you come on over to the outfit that I'm going to be with." I thought, "Well, if the rest of the people are like this individual, it wouldn't be a bad deal." So I told him. "Yeah." Well, I was bright enough, even at that point, to realize a captain in the Army doesn't pull a lot of strings, and I thought, Well, that's the last time I'll ever see him.

I sat there waiting for an assignment to come out. They'd told me I'd probably be going to 1st Cav [Cavalry Division] as a forward observer or 25th Infantry Division, because that was the AO [Area of Operations] we were in. Nothing happened; nothing happened, and I waited for about three, four hours. All the sudden, here's the captain in a jeep and a trailer. He pulls up in front of the Repo Depot and comes in and finds me and said, "Okay, Perry, hop in the jeep. You're going with me," and off we went into the wild blue.

DePue: Did you have orders in hand?

Perry: No, no. He just dragged me over to the battalion. The personnel warrant officer over at the battalion headquarters called over, cut the orders, and then they had the orders done. It was just kind of an interesting way to get into a unit. (laughs)

DePue: What was the unit you were assigned to?

Perry: It was 5th Battalion, 2nd Artillery, and it was a composite battalion made up of Dusters, a 40mm Duster; Quad-50s, truck mounted Quad 50s; and searchlights, twenty-three inch jeep mounted searchlights that worked on white light or infrared. We were in high demand; people liked us.

DePue: Hang on here just a second. Duster, tell us what a duster is.

Perry: Duster is basically a tank chassis with a open turret on top with two forty millimeter guns. Your loaders had like…I forget if it's four or six round clips that they'd feed into this beast. You'd fire a clip off, and you had to have a loader right there with another four to put in there. They worked real well as crews and put out lots and lots of ammunition. This thing had a range of… Well, it could do indirect fire, but we very rarely used it in indirect fire. But in perimeter security, you were always concerned about VC [Viet Cong] coming in, so it would range out to 1,200 meters and boy, Charlie [slang term for Viet Cong] didn't like it. He didn't like that weapon at all.

DePue: Forty millimeter rounds?

Perry: Forty millimeter.

DePue: Were any of these explosive rounds?

Perry: Yeah, absolutely.

DePue: So they'd go out a set distance and explode?

Perry: Yeah, at a point, detonating fuse and bang. We also had armor piercing, but we never really used that.

DePue: You say you also had Quad-50s?

Perry: Quad-50s. They were…I can't remember…It had to be like on a two and a half ton truck. The Quad-50 itself was mounted in the back end, sandbags all around, sandbags underneath the floor, lots and lots of fifty caliber ammunition with them. The mount itself was electrically controlled, so they could travers left to right; they could move the guns left to right or elevate, depress. They would throw out…You've seen fifty caliber ammunition.

DePue: It's not a small round.

Perry: No, no, it's a bullet that's three-quarters in diameter, copper, full-metal jacket. It will blow a man in half.

DePue: So what's the rationale for having four of these tied together?

Perry: Fire power. The Quad-50s were used on convoy escort, because what was happening. The Viet Cong knew our resupply routes, and we would get orders from higher headquarters. Delta 71st was the duster outfit, and they would put these deuce and a halfs, with the Quad-50s, in the convoy.

When you'd get a blocked ambush, your real mission was to drive through the ambush, so you wouldn't sustain as many friendly casualties. But if you got blocked, with everything bunched up, then the Quad-50s were there to fight off the enemy, because they'd come in with RPGs [rocket assisted projectiles] and satchel charges, whatever, to blow up tankers. It'd get real ugly, real nasty.

DePue: You just talked about how your level of confidence was pretty high going in there, that you knew how to be a good forward observer, and you knew how to do gunnery and compute firing data, all the skills that a young artillery officer should know, and you end up in a unit where none of that will come into play.

Perry: Yeah, I've never seen any of it. The only thing is, as an artilleryman, I was well-versed in gunnery. The infrared searchlights used the aiming circle. You'd actually get a direction, azimuth [the horizontal angle or direction of a compass bearing] and elevation. They had the capability, with white light at night, to bounce the white light off the clouds and diffuse the light. So Special Forces guys, further out in really fun places, would get a diffused light. They had starlight scopes, so it would help them see where they were at.

DePue: Before you get into…I want to talk quite a bit more about the searchlight part, because that's what you ended up doing?

Perry: Yeah, yeah, Lord Almighty. I'd never seen a searchlight.

DePue: Where were you stationed in Vietnam?

Perry: I was part of 5th Battalion, 2nd Artillery, as we stated. It was made up of Delta 71st, which were the Quad-50s. I was actually assigned to I Battery, 29th Field Artillery. We were attached to the 5th of the 2nd, and that was the searchlight battery. It sounds strange to say searchlight battery, but that's what we were. In my platoon, we had, I want to say twenty-six jeep-mounted searchlights. They were deployed out as sections, and there were two lights in a section, when they went out to a unit that requested our assistance or our capability for what we did.

This photo of First Lieutenant James Perry was taken in October, 1968, early in his tour in South Vietnam. He is holding a captured enemy rifle, taken from a Viet Cong during Tet of 1968. He is standing in front of I Battery, 29th FA's headquarters building. (Duster Compound near Long Binh, South Vietnam).

I was actually XO [executive officer] of the battery and second platoon leader. My actual location, during this timeframe, was a place called Duster Compound, which was near Long Binh. We had three platoons and a battery. The other battery headquarters was located up at Lai Khe, with 1st Infantry Division. The other platoon, I believe—memory's kind of fuzzy—I think was over in the Củ Chi area.

DePue: What corps area was this?

Perry: We were in III Corps.

DePue: And tell us where III Corps was.

Perry: III Corps would be found above the delta and below the central highlands in Vietnam. Saigon would be, not necessarily in the center, but would be in the south, southeast corner of the Corps. Most of my platoon assets were assigned out to places like Loch Ninh, Tay Ninh, Song Bé, around Nuey Ba Dinh. We had some around the Ben Hua area. Then further south along—I forget the name of the place—we had lights down south of Saigon. It was called the Fishnet Factory. There, we had to actually take the light out of the jeep and put it up on a fifty foot tower that they had, or a platform, part of a building.

DePue: Were you primarily operating on the western part of the III Corps area, then?

Perry: Not necessarily, pretty much north, northwest portion, because periodically, if I was back at battalion headquarters, we had an afternoon brief. The S2 [intelligence and security staff] of the battalion was briefing the battalion

commander, and the NVA [North Vietnamese Army] regiment that we were kind of chasing around was up around Parrot's Beak and near [the] Cambodian border, along Ho Chi Minh Trail. So, yeah, I guess most of the assets were deployed up there, other than Song Bé, which was north, northwest, and that was out in the jungle with the Montagnards[3].

We were assigned there to a fire base, with a eight-inch 175[mm] artillery piece. Viet Cong didn't much care for eight-inch 175 howitzer fire support bases and was always trying to infiltrate and then flip satchel charges into things and wreak havoc.

DePue: What were the divisions that were operating in III Corps at that time?

Perry: First Infantry, 25th Infantry; 1st Air Cav was in there; 196th Light Infantry Brigade. I'm trying to remember what else. Then there was a lot of South Vietnamese outfits, as well, a lot of Ranger stuff. In fact, Duster Compound, [on] the opposite side of secure fence, we had a Ranger Battalion next to us. They were a different breed.

DePue: I am really rusty on this, but didn't the My Lai Massacre occur in the 1st Cav?

Perry: No, that was Americal.

DePue: The Americal Division. Did that occur while you were there?

Perry: I've read about it. I don't remember the dates, right off the top of my head. It may have, but we didn't hear anything about it, if it did. That didn't filter through to us through, either through Armed Forces Radio…We had Armed Forces Radio, you know, "Good morning, Vietnam." [*Good Morning, Vietnam* was a highly successful 1987 film starring Robin Williams as an irreverent DJ on Armed Forces Radio.] I can remember many mornings waking up to that. It kept you sane, at least, but I think a lot of the news was censored, obviously.

DePue: It sounds like you covered quite a bit of terrain, but describe the terrain where most of your operations occurred.

Perry: Up around Song Bé, flying up there from Duster Compound would be triple canopy jungle. I was fascinated, flying up there, by all the B-52 bomb craters in the area. I don't know exactly what the Air Force was doing or who they were looking for, but there were just row after row after row of B-52 arc light runs, where you'd fly over, and you'd see green, green triple canopy. Then you'd look down and see this big round…looked like a pond back in Iowa,

[3] Also known as the Dega, the Montagnard, are the indigenous peoples of the Central Highlands of Vietnam. The term Montagnard means "people of the mountain" in French and is a carryover from the French colonial period in Vietnam. In Vietnamese, they are known by the term người Thượng (Highlanders). (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Degar)

and it was beautiful blue. I mean, it was juxtaposition on what you were really looking at.

So that was pretty much heavy jungle. It was always hot and humid, and then during the dry season, it just got hot and dry. Hell, we had six inches of dust down in the motor pool that you'd walk through. It was like walking through flour. I don't think I'd ever seen anything like that. You get that crap in your weapons, and things jam and things just don't work right.

Around Củ Chi-Dau Tieng, that's where the Tunnels of Củ Chi were. That was not as heavily jungle. It was more…reeds, high grasses, not a lot of trees that I recall, but high grass, kind of plains kind of thing.

DePue: Was it a farming region? Was it populated?

Perry: Well, other than up around the Cambodian border, it was a lot of farming. More towards Saigon and south of that, I remember running into rice paddy kinds of stuff, so that was that way towards the delta. There was agriculture. I remember, you'd drive through the country, and there were roadside stands selling watermelons and monkey fruit and weird stuff that I'd never seen, as a kid in the States.

Of course, the battalion doctor and those people say, don't eat on the economy. Well, you know, curious kids stop along the way and give somebody a couple piasters [Indochina currency that Vietnam continued to use into the 1950s and subsequently renamed the dong] or twenty dong [the currency of the South Vietnam from 1953 to May 2, 1978], and you drive off with a watermelon. So you've got a treat for the day.

DePue: You mentioned the monsoon. What was the monsoon season?

Perry: I always get this screwed up in my head now, because it was different, north versus south. Basically, the monsoons were almost like a four month season of rain. As I recall, it would have been the January timeframe, December timeframe. Basically, the trade winds shift coming off the South China Sea and bring moisture over the land.

I've never seen rain so heavy in my life. It starts raining. Imagine your heaviest rain that you've ever been in, and then imagine it going on for twenty-four hour periods. Then the sun comes out for about four hours, five hours, and it just gets blazing hot and humid, like you're in the hottest part of Florida or Texas. Then it starts the process up again, and it just rains and rains and rains. Somebody lied to me before I got to Vietnam, and said there was never lightning in Vietnam. I'm here to tell you, there was lightning, lots of it. (laughs)

During the monsoons though, when it rained, it got cooler. I remember at night trying to sleep. You were actually cold, because it cooled down and,

you know, trying to sleep at night. It was weird, because you were used to the hot and now, all the sudden, you're cool or cold, and it's still sixty, seventy degrees, but you're body's telling you you're cold.

DePue: I imagine motivation at that time was getting far enough off the ground that you're not going to get swept away.

Perry: Yeah, yeah. Honestly, a lot of times during monsoons, combat action would slow down, because neither side could engage. You couldn't fight through the high waters. It's sort of like the American Civil War; it just sort of stops for a while.

DePue: Especially the area that was heavily forested in the triple-tier canopy jungle, was Agent Orange being used when you were there?

Perry: Yeah, yes, yeah. Part of the NVA [North Vietnamese Army] would get wind that we were using chemical warfare on them. I remember, during some of the Buddhist riot stuff that went on in Saigon, we used CS gas [commonly known as tear gas], not we, not our battalion, but CS gas was being used on some of that for crowd control and then the Agent Orange. So the enemy made a big issue of chemical warfare on them.

As a kid, you know, I'm thinking, "Well, whatever the Army's doing, they're not going to hurt us. They're trying to win the war, and they're trying to take care of us." Flying up to places in the northeast, like Song Bé, helicopters were spraying one day, and then we flew through the trails of the stuff. They were above us, and the helicopter flew right through the spray of the Agent Orange. It hit the windshield of the helicopter, and they've got like big windshield wipers on it.

I remember looking at that thinking, What the hell is this? I was on the intercom, and the pilot said, "Don't worry." He said, "They're just spraying Agent Orange stuff to knock down foliage for movements down below, so the guys that are in there will be protected when they move through," because it killed everything. It just turned everything grey. But they turned the windshield wiper on the helicopter, and this stuff just smeared on the window. You couldn't see anything. I'm thinking to myself, You know, this isn't good stuff; I wasn't stupid. But the helicopter's open, and you're breathing it, and it's flying around you, and it's just everywhere.

Agent Orange was used around perimeters, where they had like little pump sprayers, like the old fire extinguishers in school. They'd go out and spray Agent Orange around to keep grass from growing up, so they could see the perimeters at night, so Charlie didn't sneak in and turn the Claymore mines around [anti-personnel mines that are directional and detonated remotely]. So if they came in, you weren't popping the Claymores, and all

those little ball bearings come flying at you. It was everywhere. Yeah, it was used a lot.

DePue: Was it orange?

Perry: No. The reason it was called orange was—on the big barrels of this stuff—there was Agent Blue and Agent White and Agent Orange. The problem with the herbicide itself was dioxin, the chemical component that causes the genetic changes and gets stored in the fat. It's the gift that keeps on giving to us guys. We've lost lots of people from cancer and heart and brain conditions to the after effects to this stuff. It was just nasty.

I can't prove this, but the rumor was that Dow Chemical and the people that were making it, were making tons of money from this stuff. If they would have gone one more step in the processing and the purification of this stuff, they could have taken the dioxin out. But, because it would have cost more, they didn't do it.

I've been on the Internet since, and I've looked at maps of South Vietnam today, and it shows Agent Orange exposure all over Vietnam. Every area that you're in there, the water systems are still contaminated with this stuff. It never goes away. It's like nuclear radiation; it's just there.

Then I was curious to see what's going on with the kids that are being born over there. They've got lots of conditions, where kids are just malformed. They're in orphanages, and they're just stuck that way. I really feel that we owe that country some cleanup and fixing what we did, because we really, really messed them up bad that way.

DePue: What was the nature of the enemy where you were located and where you did operations? Was it NVA? Was it Viet Cong? Was it both?

Perry: Somewhere up around Nuey Ba Dinh, Black Virgin Mountain and Old French Fort, we had another eight-inch 175 firebase. We were regularly probed up there by NVA regulars. I forget what regiment it was. I want to say the 32nd NVA Regiment was in that area, but I just don't recall. They were up there, and they were smart, and they were deadly.

But in other areas, it was the little guy that was smiling at you during the day, and then at night he was sabotaging stuff or setting up ambushes. So it was a combination of both. They worked together from what I saw.

DePue: Which one did you fear the most?

Perry: I didn't like either one of them. Fear, I didn't fear them. After my first thirty days in country, I was concerned about myself, my well-being, and apprehensive. I was learning new ropes and new skills and new equipment. I got into country, and my platoon sergeant, Sergeant Morrison, said, "Sir, this

is my platoon." He said, "I'll let you know when you can make a decision." I said, "That's fine. Sergeant Pruitt back in Fort Sill trained me that way too." So it wasn't a problem.

After about three weeks of our traveling together, around positions, he asked me one day, "Well, what you think we ought to do?" I gave him an answer. He said, "It's yours now." So, during the days and the rest of the time there, he'd go one direction, and I'd go another direction to check on our people, because we were spread out over 36,000 square kilometers or something. I mean, we were just everywhere, and we were being moved. A lot of times they'd move the outfit that my sections were attached to.

There was one time they just left my people in place. I got out there, and they're sitting in an empty perimeter in the monsoon period. There's six inches of water in an old firebase that had moved, and my guys were just there by themselves. I mean, I was hot. You don't do this, leave people. So we got them all loaded up and moved them to their new position.

In fact, that's the day I was helping them carry a tarp over to a jeep, and I fell into a closed latrine. If you know anything about latrines, what happens there... I mean, it was comical because, as a lieutenant, you know your people, and they know you and your team. Yeah, you've got the rank, but if they respect you, the comedy comes out.

Here they came, "Hey, sir, what are you doing down there?" There I was on solid land, and all the sudden I'm about four feet, four and a half feet, holding this tarp, trying to keep my head above water. They came over; they're laughing and pulling me out. Thank God is was raining monsoons, because it kind of washed me off.

So we were pulling out of the position, and my driver, Specialist John Schuman, said to me, as I started getting into the jeep—We had the doors on the jeep to keep rain out. That was our big luxury—he said, "Sir, would you mind?" I said, "What's that?" He said, "Would you mind riding on the hood for a while?" (both laugh) I said, "Come on, John." He said, "Sir, I've got to clean this vehicle up when we get back, and you're covered in shit." I said, "You know, you're right." So I got on the hood of the jeep, and there I rode. It washed me off pretty good, but I still smelled like hell. You start thinking about internal parasites and bugs that you pick up from that stuff.

We got them moved and got them taken care of, but I was pretty upset that there's some captain in an artillery base that just didn't give a crap about the people who were helping them and just left them. As far as I was concerned, he should have been court marshalled.

DePue: What I want to ask you now is, as much as you can, describe the tactics of employing searchlights, because most people who hear about this say, "Huh?"

Perry: They have no idea. Most people don't know searchlights were even used in country. We did a lot of different things, but primarily the searchlights were… We were part of II Field Force Headquarters, and that was the command headquarters that pretty much controlled the operational, day-to-day combat activities within III Corps area.

DePue: I got a couple pictures off the internet.

Perry: There you go. That's the old boys there.

DePue: Mounted on a jeep.

Perry: There it is on a jeep, the back end of the jeep, where your passengers would sit. The twenty-three inch light faces to the rear, and there's a mount on that, with azimuth rings, so you can actually lay that light on a direction, and you can use an aiming circle to lay the light.

First Lieutenant James Perry stands next to Sergeant Moore, one of his best section leaders, who was in charge of two jeep-mounted infrared searchlights. They were on a Duster compound near Long Binh, South Vietnam circa Oct/Nov, 1968.

DePue: Now, the obvious question that comes to mind is, aren't you kind of a target, as soon as you turn the light on?

Perry: Absolutely. In one way, the units that we belonged to, they really don't want a white light on. But when a ground attack is taking place, they really want the white light, because it will illuminate what's going on out in front of them on the perimeter. So it's a blessing and a curse. All I can say is, we usually operated on the infrared capability.

Basically, what we had within the section is we had binoculars that were like starlight scopes, that you can see green. Anything that gave off heat then, you'd pick up that green, and the infrared lit that up real well. So we can see out about 1,200 meters or so, and you could pick up movement.

At the one firebase up at Song Bé, my people picked up movement one night, coming from where the trash dump was located. You know, they take all their crap and dump it. Obviously, we weren't environmentally conscious, at that point in time in the military. My people kept reporting that they had movement, coming in from there. We were tied in to the battalion TOC [Tactical Operations Center], and it was all logged in.

They had a battery commander that really didn't believe in our system, evidently, and he kept telling these guys, over a two hour period, "Just keep observing." Well, you know what happened after two hours. They [the enemy] hit, right in front of my section, going after the jeep and tried to come through the wire. Well, we also had defensive weapons; we had M-60s. I loved M-60s because they're a great weapon. They pretty much turned about seven or eight VC in front of them into hamburger. Coincidentally, that battery commander that didn't listen to my section sergeant up there was relieved of command for not paying attention to what was going on in his perimeter.

DePue: Were there actually fire missions called in that he refused to fire?

Perry: No, no, not that. They were still operating as a typical artillery outfit and responding to missions, but he didn't listen to my people. They called into the TOC, telling him, "You've got a problem on your perimeter. We've got nine or ten people that are trying to break through the perimeter." He thought they were seeing just people down at the junkyard or the trash dump, picking through trash, dumb ass.

DePue: A stupid question, but when you're in infrared mode, the enemy was not able to notice that they were being watched?

Perry: No, usually not, unless they'd captured starlight scopes from guys that were out and about in the jungle and had gotten killed, and they [the VC] captured the equipment, but no. We never got word that they'd been supplied from Hanoi and the Russians and all those people with that kind of equipment.

DePue: When you first found out you were being assigned to a unit that had searchlights, and then you end up being the platoon leader for the searchlight platoon, did you get any special training?

Perry: No, no, no. Just here it is, and because my replacement had already left Vietnam. That's one of the reasons I got to the battalion. They were so short of lieutenants, because of the Tet thing. They were, I think, around half strength with lieutenants that they were authorized [to have] in that whole battalion at that point. Not that we were that vital to the operation mind you, but battalion commander wanted people that were trained and he could count on.

DePue: You were being told, "Back at the schoolhouse," and probably on the ride in that life expectancy of a forward observer in the 1st Cav is seven seconds.

Perry: Oh, yeah. I thought I'd landed in fat city. (laughs)

DePue: That this was a better gig?

Perry: Oh, absolutely. That's what I thought. And I've always felt a sense of guilt that I didn't get to be a forward observer in Vietnam, because that's what I'd

trained for at the schoolhouse, at OCS. I've always felt that I missed an opportunity, as bad as it might have been. You kind of feel like, Man, I should have been able to do that. But I've looked back on it in my life, and God has you go down certain paths in your life. And that was just the path that He picked for me.

DePue: What was the MOS [Military Occupational Specialty] of the crews that serviced the searchlight? The average gunner was a 13 Bravo. Did they have a different MOS?

Perry: Yeah, we had a different MOS in there. In fact, within my platoon, we had to have some real high skilled people, because they changed electronic components out; they had to maintain this stuff; they had to operate it. I had two PhDs, E4s, [the fourth enlisted rank in the US Military] in my platoon, believe it or not. Then I had guys that hadn't graduated from high school, in my platoon. And here I am, a second lieutenant, high school graduate, running the show. So it amazed me, after looking back, but it worked. I mean, it worked.

DePue: I'm assuming that the PhD's hadn't volunteered.

Perry: No, no, they were US's. (chuckles)

DePue: US being drafted?

Perry: Yes, but you know what? Out in the field, I can never tell the difference between a US and a RA, regular army guy. They're joined. When you're getting shot at, that doesn't factor in.

DePue: What kind of units and situations did you end up being deployed? How did that work? Were you always attached to a field artillery battery someplace, or were you set up on top of hills, or did you accompany units on movement, or what?

Perry: If we were attached with a unit and Two Field Force left us with that unit, then we'd travel with them. If a unit left—like I talked earlier, where this guy left my people just out in the middle of the boonies in the water—we would get a reassignment. That would end up coming back through battalion headquarters to me. Then I'd physically go find my people. Then we'd recon the routes and move. We didn't get in big convoys at that point. It was just at your own risk and move. Then you'd report in to the new unit that you were assigned to with your people, get them set up, get them introduced, get ammunition supplied, figure out what that commander wanted the people to do, where he wanted them to look, based on his, the commander's, intent and that sort of thing. Then you'd head back to figure out what the next thing was, battalion or your battery commander had for you to do. I was always busy, and that was a good thing. I was busy morning, noon and night, early on.

DePue: How many searchlights in your platoon?

Perry: I want to say we had twelve sections, two per section.

DePue: Were they deployed as sections?

Perry: Section deployment, yes.

DePue: In other words, you could have your platoon spread all over God's creation.

Perry: I did. I did. The entire year I was there, they were spread everywhere.

DePue: Did you typically spend time with a specific section?

Perry: Yes, I would go out and spend days with a section, see what was going on. Or, like I said, we had aviation assets available to the battalion.

Quite honestly, morale is important to people when they're stuck out in the boonies. So I could scrounge up SP packs, and they were great big boxes full of candy bars and cigarettes and toilet paper, whatever the hell, puzzles and magazines, morale booster kinds of things, no alcohol, of course.

First Lieutenant James Perry, Jr. awaits take-off for a resupply run in October, 1968 from the base at Song Bé, South Vietnam. Their destination that day was an artillery base near Long Binh, Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam).

DePue: What does SP stand for?

Perry: Supplementary pack. [It] came through the supply systems. If you were adept at bartering and trading, you could come up with things. I was very adept, so I took care of my people as best I could. But, to get mail out, the helicopters would be assigned to the battalion. It's kind of an ash and trash run, quite honestly, for the aviation outfits.

You'd get a UH-1 helicopter, and you'd be out at the landing pad in the morning, break of day, sunrise, and you'd throw purple smoke out for them. They'd come in and land at our landing pad. You'd load your crap up and off you went. You'd fly up to Song Bé. Song Bé from Duster Compound, where the platoon headquarters was, was almost an hour flight by air to get to this place.

You're flying over no man's land. More than once, looking down, I thought, Man, if we ever went down, you'd never get out of the place. You'd just be down in the boonies.

DePue: Did you ever take fire when you were in the helicopter?

Perry: Yeah, yes, yeah.

DePue: What's that sensation like?

Perry: Like you're a damn sitting duck, and there's nothing you can do. In fact, they issued flak jackets to all of us in Vietnam. They'd stop flak, but it's not like the current ceramic stuff that will stop bullets. I chose to protect my testicles at all times, and I would sit on my flak jacket in the helicopter, as much as possible. And when I was out in the jeep, I would sit on my flak jacket. I was a young man and still thought I might want to have kids.

But in a helicopter, getting shot at, the pilot takes evasive actions, and you start doing strange maneuvers, unbeknownst to you. And all the sudden you can look down, and there's a hole in the floor of the helicopter, and they're firing…I forget what their caliber was for the big stuff. It seems to me it would be like fifty-two caliber, similar to our fifty cal. They were down there shooting at you.

We either flew real high, where you'd be up in altitude, (both laugh) where it would be cold, literally cold, because you're not used to like fifty degrees, or you'd fly treetop. And flying treetop was a real trip, because you're ripping leaves and up and down through rivers. It's like terrain navigation; you're just up and down and bouncing around. It's pretty exciting.

DePue: Was your stomach used to all of that?

Perry: Oh, yeah, yeah, except there was one flight…We had to take malaria pills, a weekly malaria pill. Obviously [there were] lots of mosquitos and [you're] trying to keep the rate of malaria down, because once you get that, you can end up combat ineffective real quick, if you get an attack. Well, one of the side effects of the malaria pill was it loosens your bowels, and really bad. I think they used to call it in World War II Hershey Two-Step, or maybe that was World War I.

DePue: Every war has had its own name for this.

Perry: Yeah, yeah. Anyway, I was in the helicopter. We were probably at about 5,000 feet or so, and my malaria pill kicked in, from the morning. For me and my system, they were pretty fast acting. I'd take one, and it'd clean me out real quick. Well, you're at that altitude, you got to go, you got to go.

I told the helicopter pilot—I don't mean to be crude here, but you're on the intercom—I said, "I got to shit." And then he said, "You'd better not shit in my aircraft. That crew chief will just kick your butt, lieutenant." I'm talking to a major at this point, because that day we had a major flying. I said, "Jesus Christ, what am I going to do?" He said, "You've got your damn steel

pot there, sonny boy." He said, "Drop trou [trousers], and empty it out in your pot." So I took my helmet liner out and got my pot, and there I am at 5,000 feet, with three other people, taking a dump in my pot. But that's life. (chuckles) Kept everybody on the aviation side happy, but it was—

DePue: Did you keep it in the pot all the way down to the ground?

Perry: Oh, yeah. I carried my pot with me when I left the aircraft and cleaned my pot out and then put it back on my head, later on in the day. So off we went, yeah. Probably, honestly, I have more good memories of my year in Vietnam than I do of bad. I don't think about the bad.

DePue: Well, you've told me two rather humorous stories, and they both deal with a common subject.

Perry: Yeah, it's shit. (both laugh)

DePue: But maybe not so humorous. I'm still thinking that, as soon as those searchlights go on, and maybe if the enemy knows—Even if you're in there for MO [movement orders]—that you're there—

Perry: They know, and they go right for them. To be quite honest with you, yes. If there's a ground attack, the first thing they went for were either the dusters or the quad-50s that we were with, because in fire bases, we were always deployed together. We would cross train, so my searchlight people knew the jobs of the dusters and the quad-50 people. We cross trained to make sure, because in situations like that, people get wounded, killed, and you got to have the cross training, so that's what we did.

But Charlie knew what we had, and they were always reconning these areas. They were always around. They were always observing. When they came in, they went in for those direct fire weapons that we had, and they went after the searchlights. They came in with RPGs [rocket propelled grenades], and they'd fire an RPG right at the searchlight.

DePue: Was there a mentality, an attitude, that went along with working those searchlights?

Perry: Yeah. (laughs) A lot of the guys were kind of cowboys. A lot of folks didn't understand what the searchlights were about until they had them attached with them and realized that these guys are really good to have around here; they aren't as bad as we thought they were, and they're protecting our butts. So then they were taken care of, like a long lost brother, "Come on in. What do you need?"

DePue: Did you ever get attached and work with ARVN troops, Republic of Vietnam troops?

Perry: No, we did not, but like I said earlier, we had an ARVN ranger battalion right next to us at Duster Compound. In fact, their battalion commander in Tet of '69 brought all the officers, who were called back in from…Well, not all the officers, but a good proportion of the officers were called back in from the field.

We had a command performance over at the ARVN ranger's place, their headquarters, that evening, where we were served such delicacies as monkey and rat and local foods (chuckles). I often wondered what kind of parasites we were eating.

DePue: Now, we've talked a little bit about the enemy. You faced, obviously, both Viet Cong and NVA troops. Did you understand at the time the motivation of the Viet Cong, especially?

Perry: Yeah. It took me probably a couple or four months, five months, six months in country to realize that, in my viewpoint, we weren't fighting to win that war. I grew up on World War II stuff, Korean War stuff, watching *Combat!* [1960s television drama, depicting a U. S. platoon, fighting its way across Europe during World War II.] on TV, those sorts of things, to know enough about you get into a war; you fight a war; you kick the enemy's butt; you come home, and it's done.

We weren't doing that, and I realized that the NVA and those people were trying to take their country back from first the French and then us. So I could understand that, but I believe we were there stopping communism from moving further down through that area.

DePue: Even at the point where you understand why they were fighting against you?

Perry: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Somebody wants to kill you; you're going to kill them first. I mean, it's survival. I never cared for the violence that I experienced. A lot of guys would take pictures of when they'd attack, they being the NVA or Viet Cong. If they were killed out, they'd do a sweep the next day to get a body count to report to higher headquarters, because the whole war seemed to move on body count at that point in time. Anyway, they'd bring them [the dead] back in to the perimeters, and they'd take pictures of these guys that are blown apart. Those would be war souvenirs, and you get a collection of that. I never…

We weren't allowed to do that; we shouldn't be doing that. If I ever found that sort of crap with my people, I'd confiscate it, take it back to headquarters and burn it. I don't know if I answered your question. I kind of got off on a different tangent.

DePue: At any level, did you respect the enemy you were fighting?

Perry: Yeah, he was damn good and proficient at what he did.

DePue: Both NVA and Viet Cong?

Perry: Both, yeah. What I ran into, it wasn't like Joe Shit the Ragman coming at you. These were well-trained soldiers that knew what they were doing. They'd recon; they'd put a mission together. Normally, they would rehearse this stuff, and then they'd come at you. Yeah, I had respect for the enemy. You know, "Know your enemy." (both laugh)

DePue: Well, I've kind of doubled back here, but I wonder if you can remember the first experience you had in combat?

Perry: —I suppose…I was flying…It was one of my first helicopter rides up to…It really doesn't involve the enemy; it involves the U. S. I came into the battery before Captain Coleman came in. Captain Coleman was a senior captain, came into the battery as the new battery commander. The old battery commander had already rotated home.

I'd been around, and the battery commander wanted to go to all the platoon headquarters and figure out his forces and where people were at. So, he said, "Come on Perry, we're going for a ride," and off we went. The first position we went to was up at Lai Khe, the 1st Infantry Division. It was our 3rd Platoon headquarters that was up there, Lieutenant Dixon.

Anyway, we got up there, and the platoon had sent a jeep to pick us up at the airstrip. We went back in, and then we went out, off of Lai Khe, out into the countryside, visited a couple of positions, and then came back in. So we were gone probably three hours. [We] came back to the helicopter, and the helicopter was disabled; we couldn't take off. He said, "What the heck happened?"

Anyway, long story short, the co-pilot of the aircraft had a captured AK-47, and the crew chief and the co-pilot were playing John Wayne stuff and just dicking around. The co-pilot pointed the weapon at the crew chief and sent a round right through the stomach of the crew chief. Took out part of the stomach, kidney, liver. He lived, but he was evacuated out of the country. The round then proceeded through the crew chief and into the navigation electronic equipment in the front of the helicopter.

So there we sat for the rest of the day, until we could get a new aviation asset in to us. That was early on, and I'm thinking, What the hell is going on? How can people be so sloppy with what they're doing? I saw a lot of that kind of death over there, where people just didn't follow procedures, took shortcuts or did something stupid, and it cost peoples' lives or limbs.

Then the other incident that sticks in my head is…This is more combat oriented. We flew up to French Fort, a Fire Support Base, Saint Barbara. It was the wet season, and the helicopter pilot said to me, he said, "We're going

to make a fast landing. We're going to make combat landing here." I said, "Okay."

Basically that is…NVA forces had mortars out there, trained on the fire base, and they were launching stuff at us. He came in, shoved me out, and off he went. And I'm standing on engineer PSP [pierced-steel planking]. It's grading on the ground, so they've got a hard spot to land, versus landing in the mud.

Well, I'm standing there, basically naked. I've got my flak jacket and helmet on, that sort of thing. But mortar rounds came in. So I'm trying to figure, which way do I go? This is my first time in this position; I don't know where anything is at. There's bunkers built, but I'm away from the bunkers. Mortar rounds came in. I just ran off the end of the PSP into the mud and got down as low as I could. Then pretty soon the fire lifted, and the guys from the platoon came out and pulled me out of the mud, had some water, cleaned me off.

DePue: They probably had a good laugh.

Perry: Oh, yeah. "Got the new lieutenant here. Nice to meet you, sir." (laughs)

DePue: There's a lot of lore about the new guy coming into the units. How were you treated by the old hands? You mentioned your platoon sergeant already.

Perry: My platoon sergeant straightened me around real quick. He was a good guy. I was very fortunate in the Army to have good NCOs. Even later on in my career, when I became battalion commander of 105 Battalion, I had good NCOs. I learned early on that the NCO runs the Army pretty much, at least at the fighting level.

All my men seemed to respect me. I was so young looking, one of the things that I did is I grew a moustache, so I would look older, because quite honestly, fair-haired, blonde hair, blue eyed, round face, I looked like I was thirteen years old, back then. So I figured, Well, I've got to grow a moustache, at least, to look manly here. I kept it all my life. I fit in, and they fit in, and they accepted me.

It was interesting that way, because I didn't know what to expect. But I think they were more accepting of me than what I was trying to figure out, because I was trying to figure out the whole system at that point, because I hadn't been trained on any of it. The tactics that I had to learn were different than what I'd been taught at Fort Sill. The equipment was different, and things spread out all over hell's bells was completely different than what I'd been taught. So it was a fast learning curve for me too.

DePue: A lot of the officers who came in had an experience where they'd spend six months in heavy combat and then get rotated to something else, a staff position or something. Did you have that experience?

Perry: No, no. My job, when I got there, was the same job that I had when I left, and that was okay with me, I didn't…

DePue: What I'd like to have you do now is to share some of the memories of specific incidents, if you could. When we first met, you mentioned quite a few of them. But let's start with this one, and then I'll kind of let you take it from there, an incident involving a suicide.

Perry: Yeah, as the 2nd Platoon and where we were assigned there (Duster Compound), we fell on the duty roster for providing staff duty officer and officer of the day and that sort of stuff. Quite honestly, we had fifty cals on the perimeter. We had triple layer concertina [wire] all out there, and periodically we'd received rifle fire. It wasn't real bad, but we had to have guard mount and play the old stateside routine and post people out there.

It was my turn, and I had a runner (coughs). Of course, with being officer of the day, you have to have somebody that you can…he makes coffee or whatever, somebody to play cards with—when it's about 3:00 in the morning, and you can't see straight—to keep you awake, because throughout the night you've got to go out and check on your people to make sure that they're awake and alert and not asleep, and they're paying attention to what they should be paying attention to.

One of my men—I forget his name now—real nice kid, about my age, we played cards most of the night, drank coffee, just a great kid. It seemed like everything was fine, like he accepted what was going on. I couldn't tell any difference. Two days later—it was on a Sunday—I was over in one of the buildings, and I heard a round go off. You know what a rifle sounds like. I heard it; What was that? So, taking my initiative, I headed over to where I heard the bullet to try to figure out what was going on.

We had rocket towers on Duster Compound. Rocket towers were around long gun posts, and basically what you would do…We had like a BC scope up there for observation, where you could get an azimuth. So you were laid on true north, and you could look through these. So, at night, if you were up there and you saw a flash out in the distance, you had to sight on the flash and then report back to battalion headquarters, down there, what azimuth it was. Then they'd report it up to II Field Force at headquarters. Then you would triangulate that flash, and then you'd put artillery fire on that triangulation.

Anyway, the young man had been up in the tower during the day, and I still don't know why he was up there, but that's where he went. He went up

there and shot himself. Unbeknownst to me, he got a Dear John from his girlfriend, which meant she'd dumped him while he was there. Then he got a letter from his mother, saying that his mom and dad were getting divorced.

Up in the tower that afternoon, about 2:00, he put a M-16 to his chin, pulled the trigger, and blew the top of his head off. I was down at the base, and the battalion commander saw me. I was probably the first lieutenant that showed up on the scene. The battalion commander said to me, "Perry, you got a strong stomach?" I said, "Yes, sir." Our battalion doctor was already up in the tower, and he said, "I want you to go up there and help the battalion surgeon. He needs some assistance." He said, "Take one of your good men with you that can handle what you're going to see."

The tower was like thirty foot in the air and it's surrounded by half-inch plated steel, so you've got protection when you're up in the air like that. We had a cot up there. I remember there was an old army cot that was up in that thing and a couple of chairs. The square footage of this would have been maybe eight by eight, ten by ten. No, eight by eight I suppose would probably have been the largest surface area you had to move around in this thing.

I came up the ladder and came over the steel plating to get inside, and I saw the young man there. He was slumped over on the cot, and there blood, more blood than I'd seen for a while. Then his brains were laying around. The battalion surgeon said to me, he said, "Hey, Perry, here's a plastic bag. You need to scoop the brains up for me, and then we need to get another stretcher up here, so we can lower him down." We basically sandwiched him in between two military stretchers and then roped him off and lowered him to the ground.

Yeah, I've carried that for… (long pause, composing himself) I've carried that for a long time, always wondering what I missed that night when we were playing cards or what I could have said or how I could have prevented what happened. Quite honestly, there's only so much you can do, but when you're a young guy, even as you get older, you wonder what you missed. But he made a choice and did what he did, and unfortunately, we sent another young man home to his mom and dad that way.

That was a tough one to deal with. That bothered me for a long time, because I'm sitting there seeing what we're doing on the ground, maneuver-wise, engaging the enemy or not engaging and just kind of holding where we were. It was based on the peace talks that were going on up in North Vietnam, I believed. I didn't have anything to prove that, but I figured that's what was going on, and I'm thinking, You know, if we're not going to fight this goddamn war, let's just go home.

DePue: You need to be a little bit more detailed when you say, what was going on and how we were fighting. What was it that you were seeing and that you were having problems with, in regard to the tactics?

Perry: Well, what we were being told was, the Vietnamese Army was going to take over more of the war. And God love little green acorns, they tried, but they weren't capable. The leadership that I saw, they weren't as dedicated as the NVA. They didn't believe in their system enough to really want to fight for it, from what I saw.

That said, other organizations were very good, but a lot of it…Again, it depended on leadership. The first time I saw two ARVNs walking down the road, holding hands together, I thought, What in the hell is going on here, in **this** army? I'd never experienced that. I'm thinking…You know, back in '68 you think, Well, guys just don't hold hands.

DePue: You didn't understand that was part of their culture.

Perry: No, I had no idea. I hadn't been taught about that. I just didn't understand that.

DePue: What was your comment about God bless little green acorns?

Perry: Well, it was just something that popped in there.

DePue: But it means something to you. Little green acorns eventually grow into great oak trees.

Perry: Yeah. At that point in country—my time in country—I just wasn't sure what the heck we were doing there. I just wasn't sure. I'd been in enough places, seen enough things. I'd lost that first feeling that, yeah, we were there doing the right thing, and I just didn't know. I mean, I was questioning it. It didn't mean I let up on my leadership, my job or anything like that, but internally I… And I never talked to my people, my men, about that, those feelings. I just wasn't going to do that.

DePue: How about to some other officer, to somebody you could trust?

Perry: Nah, I pretty much kept it to myself, and it ate at me. I did have one friend, and we talked. He was with the Quad-50s, and he'd been out on a lot of convoys that had been ambushed, so he'd been up close, in front with it. We both asked the same stuff, "What are we doing?" We talked, but…

DePue: Do you remember his name?

Perry: Bob McCready.

DePue: He was your best friend over there?

Perry: One of them, yeah. Yeah, Bob was. And we had a newbie, a Lieutenant Rowe, that showed up. He was like us when we got there, all full of fire and vinegar.

DePue: The story you told earlier about using the infrared and watching the enemy come in, towards the perimeter, was that at Fire Base Song Bé?

Perry: Yeah, that was at Song Bé. We had another incident right before I left country. I had less than three weeks in country, where we—

DePue: Just arrived or about ready to leave?

Perry: Ready to leave. I'm kind of jumping around here, but it's one of the incidents that sticks in my head. There was a ground attack up at Fire Support Base Saint Barbara, coming out of Cambodia. They came in at night, and the first thing they went for was the infrared capability of the jeep. They got up to and inside the perimeter and fired an RPG directly at the jeep. It demolished the jeep and the light, killed two people and injured three or four other of our battalion's people that were attached to the artillery unit there.

DePue: So these are people from your platoon?

Perry: Yes. I say, luckily…As fate would have it—Let's put it that way—I mentioned the cross training stuff earlier. The Quad-50 people were operating the searchlight when this was going on. It was their shift at night to man the searchlight, and I had some of our people that were sleeping in the bunker at that point. The way the schedule shift worked, the Quad-50 people were in the jeep, and they were killed. So it wasn't my men per se, but it was still people that I was familiar with up there.

The members of the 5th Battalion, 2nd Artillery gather for a memorial service for the soldier killed during the attack on Fire Support Base St. Barbara. The ceremony was held on Duster Compound near Long Bihn, Republic of Vietnam in August 1969.

DePue: Were you on the fire base at the time?

Perry: No, I was not; I was somewhere else. Then, battalion called me up, and I came back in to Duster Compound and then the next day flew up. Then we evacuated the equipment. The bodies went to the mortuary people, and we did personal effects stuff, accounted for that.

There's a whole long procedure of what you have to do when somebody's killed in action. It's the typical Army checklist. You've got to get all their personal effects accounted for and inventoried, and that goes forward with the bodies and gets back to the family, back in the States. That was messed up.

We got the jeep back to Duster Compound and got it down to the maintenance area. We always scrounged whatever we could off these searchlights, because it's an old system, and there wasn't a lot of parts, and parts were hard to get. So anything that was salvageable, we'd cannibalize and keep. You weren't supposed to do that, but that's what we did, in order to keep the systems working.

During the process of going through the cannibalization on this, we found a good part of a human skull under the back of the light there that hadn't been evacuated with the body. Hell, we didn't know what to do with it at that point. We took it out and buried it.

DePue: Were there enemy in the wire?

Perry: Yeah. It got bad that night. They came in; they satchel charged [a demolition device whose components include an explosive, a triggering mechanism and a carrying device similar to a satchel] the mess hall. There were about twenty-some friendlies killed that night in this ground attack.

Like I said, they reconned. They watched, planned, executed, and got through. We had foo gas set out, you know, the fifty-five gallon containers of diesel, and kerosene. They were in place out in the outer perimeters. There were Claymore mines; there was three different layers of concertina going out, like a 100 yards or so, and they came through all that stuff, got through everything, satchel charges that came in.

My men told me, "They were right inside with us," because they [Perry's men] were seeing green tracers coming from where only red tracers should be. So it was pretty intense.

DePue: When you got there, were there still enemy in the wire?

Perry: Yeah. They weren't so much in the wire. They were pulled back, accounted for, stacked in a row, a nice little, neat row, little bitty guys. That's what always struck me. They were little bitty guys.

DePue: These were NVA?

Perry: Yeah. I always thought, Man, they're little bitty guys.

DePue: You talked about what you did with the friendlies that were killed and evacuating them. What did you do with the enemy that were killed?

Perry: I wasn't involved with that so much. But basically, they were accounted for the same way. They were taken back, and I don't know. I mean, I never saw bodies being disrespected. I always assumed they were taken back and given proper burial somewhere, but I had no idea where.

One of the fire bases I went to…You talked about Agent Orange earlier. I'd just had a section of lights reassigned to a new position, out in the jungle, and it was towards Song Bé, so it would have been up in the north, northeast, in the triple canopy stuff. They were in an infantry company strong point. They airlifted in the jeeps. We'd airlift stuff around too. They were airlifted in, put in, and they were pretty much by themselves. They weren't with a duster or a quad at that point.

[I] flew in to see what was going on and how they were being utilized. I remember flying in. It was like I'd walked into about the fourth ring of hell in Dante's *Inferno,* because everything, for about as far as I could see, was grey. The rest of the jungle flying was green. But we got to this position, and everything was grey.

Basically, what they do to do a base like that, to get them in there, is they come in and drop a big ass bomb in there and blow all the trees away. Engineers come in and clear it off. And that's what had taken place at this particular site. But they'd come in with defoliant, all the way around, to clean it up. And what they were going to do with this area, they were going to bring 175 howitzers in and eight inch howitzers and set up another. They were in the initial stage of establishing a firebase.

[I] came in and talked to the people and saw what they needed and talked to the infantry commander that was there and, you know, those normal arrangements that you have to make for your people, to make sure that they're being taken care of, and they can do their job for that infantry guy. They were having a hot meal that day, so they had cooks there. I had a hot meal; it wasn't bad.

I'm sitting there, and out of the corner of my eye, I see this guy with a long bamboo pole. Then I see him getting a bunch of lye. Well, you know what lye is. They used to use lye to dump on the human manure in the latrines to keep the infection out and kill all the bad stuff. It'd kind of keep the stink down too.

There's this PFC, E4, whatever. He's got this cook's ladle full of lye on a bamboo pole, and they're shoving it and dumping the lye out on this lump out there. I looked out there. It was an enemy soldier that had been out in the wire for a couple of days and was rotting. They just were putting the lye on it. They couldn't get out to it, because they'd put a minefield in place. But

In the action, the guy that had the map of the minefield had been wounded and evacuated. He had the only copy of where the mines were laid. They didn't have minesweepers, so they couldn't go out and get these bodies out of the wire. They'd let them rot in the 100 degree heat and dumped lye on them. It was like, whoa! Yeah.

DePue: Another one of the smells of Vietnam.

Perry: It was ripe, oh, yeah. Yeah, you'd get into a town in Vietnam, a little village, and they always had an open air market. You'd come through there, and it would hit you. If the wind was blowing in the right direction, everything was…It was crawling with flies, and it was the meat and fish. I can close my eyes and still smell that. It's just there.

DePue: Did you ever have any operations in Cambodia?

Perry: No, not at that point. We were close to Cambodia. We were within eight or nine kilometers, but we never went in. There'd been a bridge on a river up there that had been destroyed by the enemy. It was a main highway, and they took this bridge down, a concrete bridge. It was a big time bridge, and they blew it up. Two of the lanes were in the water, and we had lights there, along with dusters.

Anyway, they'd had an engagement. We were flying up that morning to go see the aftermath. Pilots flew by ground recognition. They had the maps, and you just flew. You kind of knew where you were headed. Now the weather had socked in. It was low ceilings, and we were flying. I was on the intercom with the pilot, and I said, "We've sure been up here for a long time. A lot longer than we should be, to get to where we're going." He said, "Yeah, you're right. I can't see the ground, so I don't know exactly where we're at." I said to him, "That makes me feel real damn good." He said, "Yeah, I know."

Within a minute, the clouds opened up, and we had an opening where he could identify something on the ground. He said, "Holy Christ, we're over Cambodia." And just that fast, he did a U-turn with the bird and "*whoppel, whoppel, whop*." We got back to where we belonged real quick. So that was my only experience over Cambodia.

DePue: Did you earn any awards while you were there?

Perry: I had…no offense…My battery commander, Captain Coleman, got promoted to major, while he was still battery commander. They left him in the battery command as a major, because he was so short in time to rotating out of country. He left, and then I pretty much took over the battery, as the XO. I kind of ran the battery then. I was going to all places, all the platoon locations and doing that.

DePue: Are you still second lieutenant?

Perry: No, I was a first by that time. I got promoted to first lieutenant after I was in country a month, so that helped out a whole lot, versus running around with my butter bar [slang for a second lieutenant, whose rank insignia is a golden bar]. So anyway, the new battery commander came in. He was a West Point guy. He was by the book, hadn't realized that the book didn't necessarily work. You know, he was pretty rigid. So I took him around to all the positions and places that we'd been and were.

On one of the flights home, he asked me if I would like him to put me in for a Bronze Star. I just stopped him, and I said, "Well, sir, if you've goddamn got to ask me if you want me to do it, I guess I haven't earned it," I said, "You figure it out, with all due respect, sir." And I said, "Is there anything else this afternoon?" He said, "No, you're dismissed." I gave him a salute and headed back off to my hooch, and I never got that Bronze Star.

DePue: Had you done something to deserve a Bronze Star?

Perry: It would not have been for valor. There are two types of Bronze Stars, an administrative, just for doing your job—

DePue: Meritorious service.

Perry: Yeah, meritorious, kind of a Podunk thing, "Well, you're a good boy. Here you are." Or combat incident Bronze Star for valor. I never did anything that would earn anything like that. I was just doing my job.

DePue: But had you earned a Meritorious Service?

Perry: Had I kept my mouth shut, yeah, I would have been awarded Bronze Star.

DePue: Was that kind of normal or typical?

Perry: Pretty much, yeah. But it just hit me the wrong way that day, when the new guy asked me if I deserved…if I'd like to…You've been a commander. I've been a commander. You don't ask that sort of thing of people. You just do it, based on their worth and their service.

DePue: Is it part of taking care of your soldiers?

Perry: Yeah, absolutely. Anyway, years later, when I got promoted to full colonel, I'd never seen my OER [Officer Evaluation Report] from Vietnam. I'd had a run in with the S-3 of the battalion and new battery commander, and I thought, Oh man, this thing's going to come back to haunt me. But I finally went to the old microfiche file, because you've got to review all that stuff before that promotion, to see if there's anything negative in there, so you can respond to it before it hits a board. I've probably got the best OER I ever got in the Army, when I was there. I about fell over when I read the OER, after twenty-some years.

Well, the one medal that always griped my butt, too, that I did earn, was I had enough hours on helicopters that I earned the Air Medal. And right before I'd gotten enough hours in to put in to personnel for the award, the battalion command structure came out and said—and this had come from higher—"We're awarding too many Air Medals, so you can't award Air Medals anymore. You've got to put a lid on it." So I was sitting there saying, "Well, crap, I've earned this medal, and now I can't have the damn thing." So I didn't get that medal either.

DePue: Now you just mentioned that you kind of messed up and didn't get a Bronze Star, because of your mouth. Did you mention the operations officer or somebody else that you—

Perry: Yeah, I was up in the rocket tower one night. I was on assignment for rocket tower duty. It was Tet of '69, and we are at a heightened state of alert. I was up there in about…Oh, I don't know. It was dark, about 8:30 or so. I can see where the fire's coming from, and I can hear the bullets whizzing overhead. I've got a guy, somebody I had on the corner of the closest village that was probably 2,000 yards from us, that range. I had fifty cals on the perimeter, and they could see the fire too. So I called down to operations.

Well, nobody was in operations. The battalion commander had had an officers' club built on compound, and they were all over having a drink and having a good time. So I called down. Well, they finally get the S-3 from the club to come over to the operations center, and I said, "Sir, I'm getting fire." He said, "Oh, the hell you are." I said, "Sir, with all due respect, I know what bullets sound like. I can see a flash; I can hear a bang, and I can hear bullets. I'd like to have permission to return fire." I said, "Both the fifty cal gunners, on each side of the perimeter, have this clown engaged, got him targeted, and I want to return fire."

He said, "Oh, Christ, Perry, that's going to take forever to get approval. You've got to go through the village chief, and you've got to work through their system and then back up through our system to get permission, at this point in time, to return fire." Those were our rules of engagement. So upshot of this was, the major said, "Just keep observing, Perry." And I said, "With all due respect, sir, I'm keeping my fricking head down below the steel. I can't fire on him. I'm not going to sit here and be a damn duck to get shot." I hung the phone up.

Well, lieutenants don't do that to majors, especially when they're Rhodes Scholars, which this guy was and liked to tell me about it and other people about it.

DePue: Another West Pointer?

Perry: I don't know. I honestly don't know if he was. I'm assuming he probably was, too. (laughs) No offense. Anyway, I got done with my shift, and I'm done the next morning. I'm down at the mess hall getting chow. And somebody from the S-3 offices runs in the mess hall and says, "The major wants to see you right now. The S-3 wants you." Well, I'm getting kind of short with my time in country, and I've got an attitude at this point. I said, "Fine."

So I report in. I do the hand salute. I stand at parade rest, and that's probably the best ass chewing I've ever had in the Army. I mean, he chewed all around it, and the hole fell and hit the ground. It went clink. He asked me, he said, "Are you planning to make the Army a career?" And I said, "Well, after what I've seen in Vietnam, no, sir." He said, "Well, that's damn good, because you'd never make it in the Army. I've got news for you. You don't have the mindset to make it."

I said, "Yes, sir. Whatever you think, sir." He said, "You're dismissed." I said, "Yes, sir," and saluted again and left. That's why I thought the OER [would be bad], because he was in the rating chain, so I figured that was…When I saw it years later, I thought, "Oh, man, this is going to be bad." But he wrote me up a great report, so maybe he respected me telling him bug off, and when I hung the phone up. I don't know.

DePue: You said it was the best ass chewing you ever got, because he was good at doing it?

Perry: Yeah, excellent. He was mad. Oh, he was hot. When I walked in, I could see the steam coming out of his ears. I mean, he was hot, and rightfully so, because there was some disrespect on my part. And boy, he could have [been] a lot worse on me that he was.

DePue: Did you feel contrite afterwards?

Perry: No, no. (both chuckle)

DePue: There's been a theme here, as we've gone through this.

Perry: It's my personality. I've carried this all my life. (laughs)

DePue: Let's go back to that incident and the rules of engagement. Was that part of what didn't make sense to you?

Perry: Absolutely. Yeah. I mean, total stupidity. You've got somebody trying to take shots at you. I don't care if it's just somebody out there taking potshots, I wanted to kill him. He's trying to kill me. I took it kind of personal; let's put it that way. (laughs)

DePue: That somebody was trying to kill you.

Perry: Yeah, I didn't like being shot at, and I didn't like sitting there in the open and being shot at.

DePue: Did you put any of your soldiers in for medals?

Perry: Yes. I had one incident that sticks out in my mind. I never found out until forty years later that the medal had actually come through, and both these soldiers were awarded Silver Stars.

Again, my lights were attached. Yeah, 82nd Airborne was operating in our area, too. They were with a unit of the 82nd Airborne, and there was a ground attack. It was during the daylight. It wasn't at night. There'd been a ground attack, an engagement; let's put it that way. There was an engagement on a defensive position that my people were in. And three 82nd Airborne guys had been hit and were down and were out in the open, a lot of fire coming in. I mean, it's hot.

The people from the 82nd wouldn't get out to get these people out of the line of fire. They just stayed dug-in in their foxholes and their bunker and stuff, and they wouldn't get out to go get their people, and their people are getting shot at. The enemy can see them, and they're hitting them again. They got hit a couple of times while they were laying there.

My platoon sergeant was Sergeant Moore, and I forget the E4's name that was with Moore. They went out, under fire, under hostile fire. It wasn't like they walked out five or ten foot. They had to go like twenty, twenty-five, thirty, forty, fifty feet to get these people, under fire, and drag them back to safety. And then they had to stop the bleeding, clear the airways, those sorts of things. Then they had to get a medic in there, and they had to get them out of there, which they did.

I got wind of what happened. I went in, and you've got to do all the witness statements. We did the witness statements, and I had everything I thought I needed. I went to our personnel warrant officer, the chief, and I said, "Here, I want to submit these guys for Silver Stars." I said, "I think what they did qualifies." He said, "Well, you're going to need some more witness statements," and whatever. I said, "Okay, fine." So we got all that stuff done and submitted the paperwork. It went up to II Field Force.

They came back and said, "We really don't think this warrants Silver Star. How about Bronze Star with V?" We're kind of in a negotiating thing. I'm thinking, Wait a minute; this doesn't make sense. I'm the recommending officer, and I had to buy off on that. I said, "Hell no." I said, "They deserve Silver Stars." Well, this went on for months. Two or three times, this paperwork came back, and it was the same sort of thing. I said, "No, I'm not going to sign off on Bronze Stars. They deserve Silver Stars." Well, I left country. This was still going on. I left Vietnam. I never knew if they got

Bronze Star, Silver Star or anything, because they left Vietnam too. They were civilians. They were back home.

I finally linked up. The only way I found out what happened eventually was I linked up on the computer, on the Internet with…There's a Duster, Quad-50 association online, and they send out a monthly letter. The first or second letter I got, they had a section in there of people that got Silver Stars. Well, they had a name here, and they put down the incident of what happened. I'm reading this, and I said, "Hell, this is the award that I typed up. This is some of the stuff I typed up."

The bottom line is, they did eventually receive Silver Stars, but they were civilians when it got to them in the States. So I thought, "Alright!" Forty years later, I found out standing your ground works. Yeah, I was happy for that.

DePue: The award could have, if I'm correct, it been downgraded at a higher level command, right?

Perry: Oh, absolutely. I kept fighting it. Yeah, but I kept fighting; I kept fighting it, because they'd come back and say, "Well, we're looking at downgrading." And I'd write letters. I talked to a lot of people on that one.

DePue: You've talked about quite a few experiences you've had. Is there anything else that you can recall that you want to share?

Perry: I don't know, just that it was damn hot, damn dusty. Then it got damn rainy and damn wet. We all believed pretty much in what we were doing. If you had doubts, you still did it for your fellow soldier that was along with you. You just had a sense of responsibility. At least I did as a lieutenant. Fort Sill beat in my head, you take care of your soldiers, and I've carried that throughout my career, you try to take care of your people.

DePue: Were you ever injured?

Perry: Yeah, as a matter of fact, I was. I came home. I had a piece of shrapnel work out of my back, just a sliver. I don't know where I was or what happened or how I got it, but I had a piece of shrapnel, a little sliver, like a shard, work out of my back. I don't know where I got it, how it happened.

DePue: You didn't know it at the time?

Perry: No. I have no idea how that happened.

DePue: So no Purple Heart?

Perry: No, no, nah. Hell, you wouldn't ask for a Purple Heart for that anyway. The other incident was, I was "getting short," which means I was looking at, Hey,

I've made it. I'm going to get home. And the rumor was that, if you're going to get killed in Vietnam, you got killed in the first thirty days or your last thirty days. That's what you had to look out for, so when you had to start paying attention to things.

We were coming along Highway One, coming out of Saigon, back in towards Long Binh. There'd been a wreck in front of us, so the road blocked up. Now this is a highway just like you'd find here in the States. [It had] just been built, put down, high speed road. Our jeep stopped, and it was hot in the afternoon. I was tired, so I was in between the spare tire on the jeep and the radio, on the right-hand side. I was wedged in between that spot.

There was a South Vietnamese deuce and a half behind us. I don't know what they were doing, but they couldn't stop, and they hit us in the rear end. They hit us with pretty good force, because it knocked me out of that spot, where I was resting, taking a little siesta. All the sudden I'm flying. I flew over the driver and out the jeep, onto the highway, in the other lane. I kind of picked myself up and dusted myself off. Battery commander was with me, Major Coleman, at the time, and I just saw red.

I remember losing control and running over to this little five foot guy, South Vietnamese guy, who's probably a private and literally picking this guy up off the ground by his collars and started bouncing him off the side of this truck saying, "You MF, you're trying to kill me, and I've got thirty damn days left in this place." (both laughs) Bang, bang, bang.

The major came up—the major's a big guy—and said, "Perry, knock it off," and pulled me away from this poor kid. But I just lost control. That was a bad thing to do. I still have, to this day, those ribs that were banged up still talk to me today, yeah.

DePue: Did you lose some people in your platoon while you were there?

Perry: Yes, yeah, yeah. The first two that I lost…I alluded to the fact of accidents and stupid stuff happening. I was pretty new in country. There were three guys that were in the platoon that were soon to rotate back to the States. One was going first, and they were close buddies. So they came through the platoon sergeant and asked me if they could take a jeep off compound and go over to Bien Hoa Air Force Base and take their buddy over to the replacement depot. That's where you processed out.

Things were calm, and it was no big deal, secure roads. We were in a safe area, so the platoon sergeant and I talked, and said yeah, we could go ahead and let that…In the process of going over there, they got their friend, the one guy, to the repo station, and he was fine. But on the way back, they were in one of what they called the McNamara jeeps. They were unstable at best. They were on rain slicked road, and it flipped, rolled over and crushed

both of them, killed them. They had like two weeks left in Vietnam, and they got killed in a jeep wreck. That was one.

Then we had another incident where a young man was killed in a convoy movement, [by] a sniper. Just one of those things, you know, wrong place, wrong time. I saw, on my first convoy through…Tet was still going on, going through south Saigon. Cholon was a Chinese district there, and it had been really shot up. We were stopped. I don't know what we were stopped for, but it was about a fifty vehicle convoy. We had MP escort through there, and I watched maybe Viet Cong come up on a little Vespa. They drove up alongside the lead MP vehicle. It was [an] open jeep with a fifty cal mount in the back of the jeep, providing security.

These two little guys came up and flipped a grenade in the back of the jeep and killed three MPs with the grenade when it landed and went off. At that point I decided I didn't like my M-16 all that well, so when we got back to Duster Compound, I told my guys in the motor pool, "Go over to special services. We're going to make up a name for a lieutenant and a unit. I want you to check out a 12-gauge pump shotgun." So we did. They got the shotgun back, and I had them cut the barrel off. I put a sling on it, and I always carried my twelve-gauge pump with double aught buck, just for that.

I was in convoy, and I decided right then, somebody's going to flip a grenade at me, I'm going to kill them, kill them dead before I go. Every time the battalion commander would see me with that, he'd say, "Perry, you need to get rid of that weapon." I said, "Yes, sir, I'm working on it." And I carried that. He was rotating out, and he caught me in the field one day. He said, "You still have that damn shotgun, don't you? I thought I told you to get rid of that." I just smiled at him, I said, "Yes, sir, I'm working on that." He smiled back, and he said, "Okay, you damn little lieutenant, okay."

DePue: Did you have that in lieu of or in addition to the M-16?

Perry: It was in addition. I had frags, and I had a .45 that I bought off the local economy that was mine. One of my buddies had a submachine gun, .45 cal, the old tanker submachine gun. It was amazing what you could buy. I couldn't get the pistol out of country though. I sold it off, and I made a profit. So that was okay.

DePue: I'd assume the shotgun stayed in country too.

Perry: Oh yes, absolutely.

DePue: Did it find a new owner?

Perry: It found a new owner, yes. I'm sure it put out those little ball bearings very well.

DePue: We've talked quite a bit about your feelings about the tactics of the war that was being fought. Creighton Abrams took over command from Westmoreland—you just mentioned Westmoreland—in June of '68, shortly before you got there. One of the things, as I understand, that happened afterwards, was that you had less emphasis on body counts and more emphasis on things like the hearts and minds. What's your feeling about that shift in strategy and your views of Westmoreland and Creighton Abrams?

Perry: They were so far above my pay grade that I really didn't notice the impact. You knew the change of command stuff went on. In fact, we got a new weapons system in, and I got to meet Abrams one day. A Vulcan/Chaparral system came into our battalion. It was tested while I was there, field testing. They put on a fire power demonstration. They, our battalion headquarters, put a fire power demonstration on, as to what the mini-gun on the Vulcan system could do in the open field. Everybody was quite impressed with twenty millimeter fire going out, downrange, and the amount of fire power that could come out of one mini-gun. It was like "oohs and ahhs." It was during that event that I got to meet General Abrams.

DePue: Was the Vulcan also a quad system?

Perry: No, it was single. These were single. They were mounted on top of M113s.

DePue: Armored personnel carriers.

Perry: Armored personnel, yeah, I'm sorry. They were effective. We used them. There were some things that came up during field tests with us that they had to go back and work out the bugs. One was the moisture with the electric primer stuff. The humidity impacted on that. But I really wasn't involved in a whole lot with that. I did get to see them fire one day on a riverbank, hit some enemy across the river. It was like…There was nothing left, after they fired. There wasn't any return fire, I can guarantee you that.

DePue: Of all the different kinds of experiences that you dealt with, what do you think was the toughest part of serving in Vietnam?

Perry: Hmm. Well, it wasn't the physical stuff. It wasn't the heat. I think it was more the emotional thing, the separation from family and friends. I had hoped to get more letters and stuff from home and care packages. It just didn't quite work out that way, and that always disappointed me; it bothered me; it affected… You can't impact on a new marriage when you're so far away.

DePue: Pam just wasn't a letter writer?

Perry: I don't know what the problem was. There were lots of things going on, which…When I got home, I had to make a decision whether I wanted to stay married or not. I decided for Cheryl, I'd stay there. Just a lot of stuff that

happens when you're away, that you've got no control over. That ate at me a lot.

DePue: Were you hearing from your parents much?

Perry: No, not a lot, some, but not a lot. One thing that did happen that really got my goat is, my mother was a pretty forceful German lady. I was having R & R, and I was going to meet Pam in Honolulu. I figured we'd be by ourselves and ty to…

Well, unbeknownst to me, I got a letter about a week before I was supposed to go on R & R. In the letter from Pam, she told me my mother and my aunt and my daughter were also coming along. They'd latched on to the military airlines. Mom worked for the government. She could get a cheap flight to Hawaii, so they were all coming.

I said to Major…I was…He said, "What's going on, Perry?" I kind of hit the fan that day. He said, "Hey, Perry, what's going on?" I said, "Well, sir, you aren't going to believe this," and I told him what was going on. He just started rolling around, and laughed his butt off. He said, "Only you, only you." I said, "Well, I've got no control over this one." It was too late to even send letters to say, "No, don't do this."

So, when I showed up in Honolulu for R & R, there's the whole entourage. Well, you haven't seen your wife for…That's the last thing you want to see, your aunt, your mother. But it was nice to see Cheryl, the daughter, but it was like, are you kidding me? And then to boot, I ended up getting dysentery while I was on R & R, so I was sick for the entire time. I couldn't be more than 100 feet away from a toilet or a facility somewhere that had a toilet. I made the mistake of drinking un-potable water at Ton Son Nhut, before we left. I didn't know it was un-potable, and I got sick, dysentery.

DePue: How long were you on leave?

Perry: That was five days.

DePue: Was it tough to go back?

Perry: Yeah. Nah, you knew what you had to do. You just did it. If you're a soldier, you just do what you've got to do.

DePue: The next series of questions deals with what's going on in both the United States and in Vietnam. You've alluded to some of this before, but how much were you hearing about the protests that were back in the United States?

Perry: We were picking up on that. We were picking up on the fact that the war was a lot less popular back in the States, to the point that some soldiers—particularly black soldiers that I had—were really questioning why they were

there and what they were doing fighting the white man's war kind of a thing. At that point, that's when a lot of that fist bumping and jive stuff started taking place and the drug culture started seeping into organizations over there.

I found a fifty cal ammo box full of hashish at one point, at one of the fire bases where we had people. I had to relieve an NCO and dump the hashish out, when the helicopter lifted off. Nobody claimed the dope, but I damn sure didn't want my soldiers high on hashish in those kinds of positions and places. The NCO got busted down and relieved.

But that wasn't going on when I first got in country. It was six or seven months into it, when things kind of bogged down and soldiers were bored, and the news started coming in, and people were asking questions about what we were doing there. A lot of the music that was coming over was the old acid rock kind of stuff. I could notice that there was an attitudinal change, particularly amongst the young soldiers, the E4s, the E3s.

NCOs were still solid, but that younger group of soldiers, they were questioning a lot more and trying to figure out what the hell they were doing and why. A lot of times, you couldn't give them the answers that they were looking for, because you had some of the same questions.

DePue: But they're asking?

Perry: Oh, yeah, yeah. They were questioning what are we doing and why. Didn't hear a lot of it on *Armed Forces Radio*. We'd get *Stars and Stripes* stuff periodically, but sometimes these kids would get stuff from home. They'd have newspapers, so you knew about the big protests. You were still busy though, so you didn't focus totally on that stuff, but you knew it was going on. But you figured, well, that's just politics. It's none of our business what we're trying to do. Basically, you're trying to stay alive. You're trying to stay out of situations that were going to get you killed, if you could.

DePue: Do you think it affected the combat performance of the platoon?

Perry: No, no. I really don't.

DePue: Did it affect the morale of the platoon?

Perry: No.

DePue: But a lot of the things you're talking about…

Perry: Yeah, I know, I know. It's a strange contradiction there, because it weighs. But they performed every bit as good. It was up to me to find the trouble spots, to manage the trouble and to control those sorts of things, which I did. I could do it at that point.

I've talked to people that were in country after I left, and it really got bad. It got much worse than what I saw. I think I was catching the early symptoms of what was going on with the morale and the fraggings [the deliberate killing or attempted killing of a soldier by a fellow soldier] and shooting people, because that was going on.

In fact, we had an incident in our battalion. I mentioned the battalion commander had an officers' club built. Well, some of the people out in the field couldn't get supplies they needed, and somebody came in and flipped a CS gas grenade into the back of the bar the night they had the grand opening for this officers' club. We had criminal investigation, CID [Criminal Investigation Division], in [the] battalion for, oh God, days, trying to dig around.

One CID guy said to me—I remember because he interviewed me—he said, "Lieutenant, we know you know something. You need to tell us right now. This could be Leavenworth," and yada-yada. I just looked at him, and I said, "I don't know anything. I don't know what you're talking about. I know it happened, but I don't know who did it or what."

DePue: Was that actually the case?

Perry: Kind of, sort of. I had my suspicions, but I just…

DePue: An enlisted man?

Perry: Yeah, yeah. And then we had another. I talked about the racial stuff. I said it wasn't too bad, but that's not necessarily the case. We had an incident one night. Obviously, we're in combat. Soldiers have their M-16s. They've got ammunition, the basic load. They've got what they need to react if there's enemy on the perimeter. So you've got all that stuff.

We had an enlisted club, also, there on Duster Compound. They could get beer, and that's about it. Well, we had a couple of black soldiers down, and you had, I guess, what you'd call redneck white guys from the South, and there was a dustup down there about something.

One of the black soldiers, he'd been drinking enough, so his judgment was obviously impaired. But he went back to his area and got his M-16 locked and loaded and went into an orderly room, where three people—it was in the evening—were on duty, CQ [charge of quarters] stuff. He opened up and shot all three of them, basically, point blank. I don't think he was trying to kill them, because what he did is he fired into the concrete, but the ricochets came up and took them out.

Thank God we had a battalion surgeon, and boy, he kept all three of these guys alive for quite a while, because it was a wet, foggy kind of evening, and we couldn't get helicopters in to evacuate these people to the…It wasn't

MASH unit; we had a medical hospital not too far from where we were at, at Long Binh. It was just a bad night.

The doc kept these guys alive. I wasn't involved in the actual taking away of anything, but I witnessed what went on. We had a reaction force come in and disarm the individual that shot these guys, and we had a…You know what a Conex container is, a big metal [box], like eight by eight by eight or whatever, and we had a lock on it. We had air holes in it for incidents where people got real rowdy, as punishment before they got shipped off to other places. Well, he was put in there for his own protection, because the battalion commander was afraid there was going to be, basically, a damn race riot on this compound.

He wasn't damn well going to have that, so they locked him [the black soldier] up and closed clubs down. Everybody was restricted to their areas, and [they] locked everything down that night. Then, the next morning, the battalion got this guy and sent him over to Long Binh jail, LBJ on Long Binh, which is a bad place to have to go. Then, from there he went to…He did life at Leavenworth, so he's still breaking big rocks into little rocks, thinking about what he did.

DePue: Did the three survive?

Perry: Yeah, thank God they all survived. The battalion surgeon kept them alive. I'm amazed, because I saw them. I went into the orderly room, shortly after they were shot up, and it was gut wounds and lower leg wounds and man. You know, an M-16 round, coming off the concrete that close, it's bouncing and spinning bad, a lot of long-term damage. But they were all evacuated to the local hospital, finally. We had to finally drive them. The surgeon wanted an aircraft, because it was quicker, but we drove them. They all made it.

First Lieutenant Perry enjoys some down time in front of his hooch in November, 1968, after returning from a forward base, known as Old French Fort. The officers were placing sand bags around their hooch for protection against enemy mortar fire. [Duster Compound near Long Binh, South Vietnam]

DePue: Were you one of those who, towards the end of your tour, were counted the days?

Perry: Yeah. Everybody did. You were just happy to be going home.

DePue: What were some of the traditions that were tied to that?

Perry: Well, guys would keep short time calendars the last month, and you'd mark days off. Unfortunately, the shorter we got…Like I said, the

battalion was short of lieutenants when I arrived. We got a big influx of lieutenants, so we all got in at the same time, in country. So, we were all leaving at the same time.

Well, the closer we got to leaving…We had a hooch, and we had sandbags around it. We had bunkers. But we were scroungers, and we'd scrounged up an old, thirty year-old refrigerator, and we hooked that up. We had ration cards, and we could get over to the liquor store. So we'd drink, drink. Quite honestly, I think we were all a bunch of damn alcoholics by the time we got home, because we were drinking there, at the end, thirty nights straight. Every night we were drinking. [It was] nothing unusual to finish up a half bottle of whiskey and hit the rack.

In fact, one night I'd done that, and we got rocketed on compound, mortars and rockets that night, and I didn't even know it. Guys [were] dragging me out. The only thing I knew was I was all scraped up and scratched up and bumped. I said, "What the hell did you guys do to me last night?" They said, "Well, we got a rocket attack, and we had to get you out of the rack." But that wasn't uncommon in that war. It was dope and alcohol. You had a ration card; you're a twenty-one year old kid, and you're playing cards and drinking.

When I got home, it dawned on me, there was something wrong, because I'm kind of on edge—I wonder what this is about? Well, obviously, I'd drank enough at that point that the body liked the alcohol. I've always stayed away from hard liquor since. [I'll] have a shot of Southern Comfort now and then, but that's about it.

DePue: What were the troops into, beer, hard liquor?

Perry: Beer. They rarely got over to get alcohol. They couldn't get away. I had access. I had a vehicle. I could get around. I could get other people's ration cards, pretend I was them and bring stuff back, because you only got so many bottles of booze a month. But that didn't matter. You [could] always find guys who didn't drink, and you took their ration cards.

DePue: Did you bring some back for the troops?

Perry: Nah, usually you didn't do that, no.

DePue: That would be a bad thing.

Perry: No. That would be a very bad thing. The old man would get hot under the collar if he caught that. But it made good trading material though. When you needed stuff, you had a bottle of booze and somebody who didn't have it. We traded for sunglasses one time, over at the Air Force base, because we needed sunglasses. "Well, what do you need?" "Well, you got any of this?" "No, I've got this." "How about a couple bottles of this?" "Yeah, how many pair of

glasses do you want?" You walked away with twenty sets of glasses and that sort of thing.

DePue: Wouldn't there be some resentment that the officers could get all the hard liquor and the enlisted guys can't?

Perry: I never heard that, but yeah. I'm sure there was. Whenever I heard that, I always told them, "Well, you can still sign up for OCS and become a lieutenant."

DePue: What did you think about the policy that you guys were coming as individuals; you were leaving as individuals? You hear some of the stories also about the new guys and the way the old guys would treat them.

Perry: I know some of that stuff would happen. You know, you'd tell war stories to scare the newbies. I always tried to integrate people. I always set the tone of leadership, that we didn't play those sort of games. What we had to do was, you brought new people in; you taught them the ropes. You didn't come in to scare people or to get them jumpy or nervous or haze or anything like that. I didn't put up with that sort of stuff. It just wasn't good for morale, and it damn sure wasn't good for war fighting.

DePue: I've heard you make lots of comments, in talking about your relations and situations with other officers and NCOs. In general, what was your impression of the NCOs and the officers over you?

Perry: Good. They were good. I mean, they were high quality people. They weren't slouches. The battalion commander, he was kind of a hard-nosed guy, and it appeared to me that he was looking for his next promotion. But, that said, he also was effective in his job, from what I could see. As a lieutenant, it's hard for me to judge battalion commander's position and what he's supposed to do or not. But he would self-promote; let's just put it that way. He was a career guy, so he was looking for full bird, you know. [Colonels are sometimes referred to—but not addressed as—full colonels, bird colonels, or full bird colonels.] It's just one of those deals.

DePue: As far as you know, did he get there?

Perry: I don't know. I don't know.

DePue: Did you have any encounters with civilians?

Perry: We were able to get to a PX [post exchange] at one point, and there were a couple of Donut Dollies [a group of American women who volunteered to serve during the Vietnam War through the Red Cross] there that were eyeballing us, but that's about the closest encounter I got with civilians. Vietnamese civilians, yeah, we interacted.

Our battalion supported a Catholic orphanage in the town, so we got to go over there periodically and see kids. I often wondered what happened to those people after the fall. My understanding [is] a lot of those people that couldn't be retrained were just killed.

DePue: What was your feeling when you went over to the orphanage?

Perry: Well, basically those kids got dealt a very tough hand and that anything that we could do to help support that facility, we should. And we did.

DePue: Do you think, just by virtue of being a Catholic orphanage, supported by the Americans, was going to be tough on them?

Perry: Yes. Yeah.

DePue: When you said some of them, you heard or you thought they might have been killed afterwards, after it all came crashing down, were you talking about the kids?

Perry: No, the nuns, the priests, anybody in a position of authority, like village chiefs, anybody that dealt with Americans. I know the communist mindset was to reeducate to get all that stuff out of their heads and turn them back into good little robots (chuckles) who would follow the party line.

DePue: Were these Vietnamese nuns and priests?

Perry: Yes. Yes.

DePue: Here's a complete change of questions. Did you have a chance to see any American or American entertainers come over?

Perry: I never went. Bob Hope came into the area and had a show at Christmas at Long Binh. I was always a firm believer that you don't mass people, because rockets and mortars still reach people, no matter when. For my own self-protection, I thought, Nah, I'm not going to go get in a big crowd and be part of that, when bad things can happen." I wasn't going to make myself a target. I've often wished I would have been able to see that.

But I ran into one of Bing Crosby's sons. He was over glad-handing one day, and he was really impressed with himself. I do remember that. He was telling me who he was and yada-yada-yada. I said, "Well, sir, with all due respect, I don't have a lot of time here. I've got to get moving down the road," and just kind of off I went. (laughs) I wasn't impressed and just went on my merry way.

DePue: Tell me about the food. Did you get decent chow?

Perry: Well, they served a lot of roast beef over there, and I always said it was kangaroo meat from Australia. (laughs) It was hard eating stuff. When you were back at Duster Compound—it was more to win the hearts and minds stuff—they had cooks and those folks from off the local economy. We did have American supervision, but they were in serving and doing things like that.

Unfortunately, one of the Vietnamese cooks came down with hepatitis and contaminated all the food at one point in time. They locked us all down and kept us on compound and flew in serum to give us shots. [It was] the worst damn shot I'd ever had, because the stuff had been on ice, and they just loaded it in the syringe and shoved it in your butt. You walked around with about a half dollar size lump in your keister for about four days, until it dissipated.

DePue: How about C-rations? Did you get plenty of those?

Perry: Yeah, I always carried C-rats, and the guys out in the firebases always had plenty of stuff. Those were the things I'd get back and forth for the units they were attached to. We never lacked for things.

DePue: What was your favorite C-ration and your least favorite C-ration?

Perry: I didn't like the lima bean stuff, and I did like the eggs and the ham, protein. And I always drank pop. That was the other thing that I remember. I would wake up in the morning and start my day off with a warm Pepsi. I wasn't a real coffee drinker. Then, throughout the day, warm Pepsi or whatever. People always had soda pop.

We got beer one time. We decided we were going to have a platoon party one day, and we got rumors that the Navy had rib eye steaks. You had to go in, towards Saigon. Newport Beach, I think, was the name of the depot. We got the documents and forged all the signatures. My part of the job was to go get two cases of these steaks, that were reserved for like admiral, you know, high level.

You've got to go and take all the paperwork with you. Well, this is all phony paperwork. So I said, "Yeah, we'll do it. What the hell." [I] drove in, went through about two different levels of security to get in on the base. Then had my phony paperwork, gave it to a couple of people. They looked at it and said, "Okay, fine." I got two cases of rib eye, big boxes of steaks, enough to feed a platoon of fifty guys or so, and came back. I got the steaks.

Some of the enlisted guys in the motor pool were responsible for getting the beer. Well, the beer was all warm, but we got beer. Then we scrounged some other stuff from the mess hall, some potatoes and stuff like that. We had ourselves a Sunday afternoon get-together. It came to the beer, and we didn't want to drink hot beer. Well, we had enough vehicles around

with fire extinguishers. Well, you know, when you discharge a fire extinguisher, it cools things down. We used up every fire extinguisher in the battery that afternoon, cooling beer down. (chuckles)

That was another episode. I got called in to talk to the battalion commander on that one, about what happened to all the fire extinguishers; why they were all discharged. I took him through it and explained what had happened, and he just kind of fatherly said to me, "Don't do that again, Perry." I said, "No, sir. I won't."

It was kind of an inconvenience, because we had to go get all these things recharged in the next couple of days and explaining why to higher headquarters, why you have a 150 fire extinguishers that need to be recharged. That's a little difficult, with no fires.

DePue: For the next series of questions, I want to bring you back to the United States, but how about we take a quick break before that?

Perry: Good idea.

[pause]

DePue: We took a very quick break, and during the break you mentioned a couple of things. You were looking at these pictures of the searchlights.

Perry: Yes. When Mark first handed these to me, I just kind of glanced at them, just to make sure, yeah, those are jeep-mounted searchlights. The top picture…I'd talked earlier about the ground attack at Fire Support Base Saint Barbara. Looking at the jeep in this picture, I can't see the bumper numbers, but I'd almost put a paycheck on the fact that the jeep in this picture, that's blown to smithereens, was the searchlight. The protective cover in the back is blown out, and the radio is completely gone, and radio mounts are blown to shreds. I think, from my memory, this is probably the same jeep that I was talking about earlier, Mark. The background here looks like our motor pool area. So, this picture would have been the jeep, after our dead had been evacuated out of there. Then the jeep was airlifted by Chinook, back into our battalion motor pool area.

DePue: Well, I found this picture on the Internet. We will definitely include that picture with your collection, so as you're talking about this, they can see exactly what you're talking about here. You also mentioned a couple of stories that dealt with the Air Force.

Perry: Yeah, God love the Air Force. Two incidents stick in my mind. We were flying up to Song Bé one afternoon, coming back. It was rather late in the afternoon, and a lot of these areas that you flew over, they were no-fly areas. The Air Force would say, "You can't fly over this area." [They] didn't tell you why you couldn't be in the area, but you just shouldn't be there. The pilots get those warnings.

This jeep-mounted searchlight was destroyed by RPG fire at Fire Support Base, St. Barbara in August, 1969. The jeep was then airlifted to Duster Compound. One of Perry's soldiers was killed and one seriously wounded during the nighttime ground attack.

I was the senior officer, as a first lieutenant, on the flight. The pilots were warrant officers, so protocol is, you keep the senior officer on the flight posted of what's going on. Well, the pilot got on the intercom. Like I said, it was running late in the afternoon, and they needed to be back at their area of operation, with the bird, and he said, "There's a restricted fly area here, but if I can cut through the bottom corner of this, I can cut fifteen minutes, twenty minutes off of flight time. You got any problem with that?" Like a complete idiot, I said, "Nah, I don't care. Do whatever you think is right. You know more than I do about where we can be and where we can't."

It wasn't five minutes later, we were at an altitude of probably about 3-4,000 feet, and it wasn't five minutes later that all of a sudden, I…We flew with our doors in the helicopters, and half the time we didn't keep the restraining straps on the doors. So, if you had to get in and out quick, you didn't want to be messing around with a restraining strap. If you wanted to fly with your feet dangling out the damn doors, they didn't care either.

But anyway, within about five minutes, I saw the first one, and I didn't know what I was seeing. Then there was another and another and another. It was a row of bombs, hitting the ground that, from the altitude I was, it looked like it was about 300 meters of bombs hitting, probably fifty meters apart from one another, for about 300 meters. And the first thing that I saw was a white vapor cloud, coming out of the…It was like a circle, and it was a white vapor circle. Then I saw the explosion, and then it was just totally awesome. It was just fascinating to watch and see the effects of what was going on, on the ground, when these bombs were hitting.

Then, at our altitude, it took about, I don't know, about twenty seconds or so, for the concussion to reach us. At 4,000 feet, it about rocked the helicopter out of the air. We were just up there, and things inside the

helicopter, us included, were bouncing off the ceiling, bouncing around. The helicopter's going left and right and front and back. Finally the helicopter pilot was able to gain control of the helicopter, and we just did an about face and headed out of the area.

What had happened was, the Air Force had that as a no-fly zone, because they had North Vietnamese enemy down in that area, and they [the Air Force] were coming in for what they called an Arc Light, B-52 run. That's the closest I ever want to be to getting almost hit by a…I don't know what they were dropping, 1,000 pound, 500 pound bomb. But it was like, "Oh, wow, is this neat!" That first, "Wow, whoa," and then that concussion hit us, up at that altitude, and it was like, "Oh, man. We're going to die now."

So, the pilot…Once we got back, his comment to me was, "Well, I guess that wasn't a bright idea, was it?" And I said, "Nah, I should have said 'no.'" He said, "No, I should have never"…He said, "You aren't going to tell anybody about this, are you?" I said, "My lips are forever sealed." (both laugh) Well, here it is now.

The other incident was…We were coming back' it was an afternoon. I forget where we'd been, up near Cu Chi, that area, and we're coming in, in the afternoon. It was about 2:00; we're coming back to Duster Compound, and we were coming across Long Binh. They had a big Air Force base, and they had tactical aircraft, lifting off from there all the time. "Fast movers" was what they called them, and they'd go out on bombing runs.

They had a POW camp, a South Vietnamese POW camp, where the captured NVA were in holes in the ground, with bamboo restraining over them, and they were in these holes. That's where they put the prisoners that they caught. But anyway, we were right over that area, and the pilot and co-pilot were looking forward. So they weren't looking at what I was looking at. I was looking off to a ninety degree angle, at the runways, the tactical runways, as we were coming through this air space.

I had no idea how fast jet aircraft moved, but I looked up, and I saw what looked like two little dots, coming, what looked like, at us. So I got on the intercom and I said to the pilot, I said, "You need to take a quick look to your right. Something's coming at us." It happened so damn fast. We had two F-4 Phantoms, with full bomb loads…

In my memory it seems like they were twenty feet in front of us, one on top and one on bottom. It had to be further than that, but there again, it just happened so fast, and they were so quick, and they were on us. I'm sure the pilot saw us and said, "Oh crap," and managed to avoid us. But the wake after those F-4s went through, again, about knocked us out of the air. It was like, I'm checking my drawers, when I got back. It was like, "Holy crap." Those are the sort of things that happen, and in my belief, if God wasn't watching

over you, you were a dead man. But other people would say, "Oh that's just fate, and you're lucky." But, those are my two big Air Force stories.

DePue: You had mentioned that, when you were growing up, the family got you to church quite often. Did you have a unit chaplain?

Perry: Yeah, we did.

DePue: Did you attend services?

Perry: No, I didn't, but I always said my prayers. Periodically I would go in on Sunday, but I wasn't a regular church-goer at that point in my life. I've got other things to do, and we didn't get Sundays off necessarily. So, it wasn't always conducive to be there. But, yeah, periodically I would head there.

DePue: So you always said your prayers. Before you hit the sack at night?

Perry: Absolutely. I've always said the Lord's Prayer every night, asked him to protect me and my soldiers.

DePue: Let's talk about you coming home.

Perry: All right.

DePue: September 1969?

Perry: Yeah, flew in to, up around Oakland, California, came in there.

DePue: Where did you fly out, Ton Son Nhut?

Perry: Yeah, we went to Ton Son Nhut for this trip.

DePue: Another civilian aircraft?

Perry: No, we didn't either go to Ton Son Nhut. We went to Long Binh, took the freedom bird out of Long Binh, a long-ass trip.

DePue: Was this another civilian aircraft?

Perry: Yes. It was a United [Airlines] flight, as a matter of fact.

DePue: With stewardesses and the whole thing?

Perry: Round eyes. (laughs) Yee-haw.

DePue: What's the attitude? Different between coming in and going out?

Perry: Oh, we were happy as clams. Liftoff, there's a big cheer on the plane. Everybody's slapping each other on the back. We're all happy as clams.

DePue: Were they serving drinks?

Perry: I don't think so. I don't remember that. I honestly don't remember if they were or not. I'm sure they must have, but what I didn't know, when we lifted off, is we were carrying dead Americans in the cargo hold, had flag draped coffins down below us. As we're all happy and having a great time, we've got dead guys, our own dead, underneath, coming with us. None of us knew that.

It wasn't until we landed and we're getting off the plane, I happened to look off side the wing, and I saw the caskets being unloaded, flag draped coffins in aluminum caskets. And I thought, "Ah, shit." You know, thinking, "Well, we're happy, and look at this." Luckily, most people didn't notice it.

DePue: Where did you land?

Perry: I don't remember the name of the base. It was outside of Oakland, California, because I remember flying out of San Francisco, once I got signed out of the Army. So it was right there, in that area. It was an Air Force base.

When we landed and got off-loaded, we loaded up on Air Force buses that took the officers over to the BOQ [Bachelor Officer Headquarters] that night. The enlisted had quarters. Then, the next morning…No, it wasn't the next morning.

It took like a period of two days to do the out-processing, because I had decided, at that point, I wasn't going to make the Army a career. At one point, I had thought about it. I knew the Army, as it comes through in this interview, and I was comfortable in the Army, but I'd gotten pretty well disillusioned by what I thought we were supposed to do, versus what we were doing. And I thought, "Nah, I don't want any part of this. I'm going to come back to States and go to college."

DePue: Did your coming back coincide with the end of your tour?

Perry: Yes. Everything finished right about the same time. I ended up walking with a big wad of bills, from leave that I hadn't taken. So I had boo coo bucks, at least what it seemed like to a lieutenant at that point in time. I was headed home.

I got over to the BOQ. It was a couple of days for processing. I remember, though, a week before that, I was out in combat zone. Then, all the sudden, here I was back stateside. I was in a BOQ, single room, with a bed and a shower and little refrigerator and new places where I could go eat, mess halls.

The first day, I just sat in the room by myself, didn't watch TV. I just closed the blinds and just sat there. I really didn't know what to do, and I don't know why I did that. But I just didn't want to be around people. Things

were happening so fast at that point. I guess it must have been self-preservation to just decompress. That's kind of how I handled that first day back. And trying to make sense.

I'd been raised a good German, Lutheran kid, Christian upbringing, raised as "Thou shalt not kill." Yet, I don't know that I personally killed anybody, but I knew I was damn well capable of killing any number of people to survive. It wouldn't bother me a bit. And I had to try to grapple with that. I had to grapple with that for a long time. How could somebody, who professes this, actually, when push comes to shove, be willing to do this? My men killed lots of people, so individually, I might not have done it, but my guys did. So, following the chain of command. I wrestled with that one for a while. Plus, I'd been drinking a lot, so you've got that thrown into the mix. It wasn't a good combination, to come home that way.

DePue: You spent just a couple of days there, you said?

Perry: Uh huh. We out-processed. I separated from the Army. I remember, I was able to catch a flight out of San Francisco.

DePue: Were you in uniform still?

Perry: Yeah, I came home in uniform.

DePue: Class B's?

Perry: Yeah, Class B's. I was a brave puppy. I was proud of what I did. I didn't give a crap what any of the idiots out in California were doing.

DePue: You flew out of San Francisco, you said. Any situations develop in the airport?

Perry: No, no, nothing. Had it happened, I would have gladly taken care of the problem. (both laugh) I was 140 pounds, dripping wet. I was pure muscle, and I wasn't going to take crap from anybody. I'd made that decision. So maybe I presented an aura, but people left me alone.

DePue: Had you heard stories about things?

Perry: Yes, I'd heard stories of people spitting on soldiers. The reason they had wire mesh, again, on the buses…It hadn't happened to me, but a couple of days before, they'd had peace protestors out there, [against] returning Vietnam vets. They were bombarding the buses with bags of feces and jugs of urine. So, it wasn't quite the parade my dad got or the World War II guys got, when they came home. So there was some animosity about some of that. It's like, you can't explain to all these morons what you were trying to do. You're a little upset with their lack of knowledge and their pretending they knew what war was about and what we were doing. So, yeah.

But, long story short, I told the cab driver, I said, "There's an extra 100 bucks for you in this, if you can get me to the airport on time." I got the wildest ride of my life, coming over the Golden Gate Bridge, getting to the airport, because the cabby scared me to death. I thought, "God, I'm going to die on this damn bridge." But he got me there, and I gave him the 100 bucks and caught my flight and made it to O'Hare.

I called the wife to let her know, from San Francisco, when I was coming into the Quad City Airport and made all my connections. In Chicago, I was so flustered, I left my wallet, with my big amount of separation pay, on the counter. I got down to my gate to catch the flight back to the Quad City Airport. Now, you've got to imagine. I'm dressed in my Class B's, and I'm hauling a big-ass duffle bag that probably weighs, I don't know, sixty, seventy, eighty pounds of equipment and crap. And there I am, all the way down at O'Hare, and my ticket counter is like, I don't know, blocks away. So anyway, I left my bag at the gate with the people there and went running back to the ticket counter to see if maybe somebody had turned my wallet in. I figured, there's no way.

DePue: How much money in it?

Perry: Oh, there was probably $13-1400. In 1968, that was probably like having 30-40,000 bucks in today's money. I'm thinking, Oh, you dumb ass, you dumb idiot; this is the money you're going to live on. And I thought, Oh, man. Anyway, I get back there. I'm in a half panic. I get up to the gate and off the right of me, there's a guy, a little older than me, probably about my age, and he's standing there. He said, "Here, I have something for you." He was a prior Vietnam vet. He'd been over there earlier. He'd seen me, saw the wallet. He stayed with the wallet and gave it to me. So, I didn't have a bad experience with civilians. I had a very good experience with a guy. I gave him 100 bucks and headed off, back down the road. I told him, "Thank you." I never did get his name; I wish I had. That was my coming back story.

But I got home. I landed at the Quad City Airport, and my wife wasn't there. I'm sitting on my duffle bag for almost two hours before she showed up. I said, "Where you been?" She said, "Oh, I just had things to do." I thought right then, "Jesus Christ, I'm coming back from a combat zone, where I could have been killed, and you had other things to do, rather than be here to see me when I got home?" That's when, in my mind, I'm thinking, "There's some crap going on here, and I'm basically done with this marriage." I don't mind telling you, I was pissed.

DePue: Had you some inklings that there were some problems with the marriage, while you were over in Nam?

Perry: Yeah, yeah I did. I had a friend, well supposedly a friend…Somebody sent me an anonymous letter, saying there's a lot of partying and stuff going on in the

mobile home and things like that. So I had that. But, boy, I wish they hadn't sent that letter to me. I needed my focus on what I was doing, and try as hard as I could not to think about what may be going on at home, that was pulling my mindset to, I'd sure like to go find Jody and kick his ass. (chuckles) I don't know. To this day, I don't know what may or may not have been going on. I just don't know. It's better off.

DePue: It's worth mentioning here that Jody[4] is nobody in particular; it's the guy who is back home.

Perry: Yep, yep, taking care of business.

DePue: Yeah. So, when you talk about Jody calls, soldiers sing when they're running in formation.

Perry: I'd like to go find Jody. (both laugh) But like I said, we'd been married early. We were young. In our first three years of marriage, we'd spent approximately five months together. You can't build a relationship when you're that young, and people go their own way. But rather than pressing a divorce—and, like I said, I don't know for sure what may or may not have happened—rather than going that route…When I saw my daughter and she's up walking and talking and cuter than a button, I thought, It's not right. The kid needs a mom and a dad. So I just said, "Okay, fine."

DePue: What did she think about this strange guy that suddenly showed up?

Perry: She really had no idea who I was. I think she sensed who I was, but it was getting reacquainted, totally reacquainted. She was talking at this point and walking. She's like a little person, at this point. It was like, whoa. I was upset that I'd missed out that much of her life. But, yeah, cute kid, cute little girl.

DePue: Were you able to patch things together then in fairly short order, with your wife?

Perry: Yeah, we worked around issues. I didn't try to dig into what happened. I just tried to gunny sack it, but gunny sacking usually doesn't work with things. It took about thirteen years, from that point, and then the marriage ended.

DePue: Had she changed, when you came back? She's what, twenty at this time?

Perry: Yeah. No. Yes and no, but I had changed. I had changed through my military training. I had left her, as one person, kind of a happy-go-lucky guy that's out for the party or the good time, an easy going guy. I came back a trained killer, for lack of better term, with an officer background that expected people to do

[4] In the United States, some cadences are called "jody calls" or "jodies," after Jody, a recurring character who figures in some traditional cadences; Jody refers to the man with whom a serviceman's wife/girlfriend cheats, while they are deployed.

what they're supposed to do. So it was hard for her to get…And I didn't let her get close. I didn't tell her stuff. I just shut up about my Vietnam experiences.

In fact, this interview is really the first time that I've ever talked in depth about any of this stuff. I'm amazed with the questions, how much I remember and how quick stuff pops back. I thought it would be [like] trying to pull teeth out of me, but it doesn't work that way, obviously.

DePue: Why weren't you telling her stuff?

Perry: I was mad. I was angry with her. I thought, God damn it! If you can't write me a letter, and you can't be at a fricking airport to pick me up, I'm not telling you shit. That's kind of the way it went, which didn't help anything in the marriage, by the way.

DePue: How about your dad? It doesn't sound like you talked to your dad about it either.

Perry: Dad didn't show up. Dad wasn't around. My parents had gotten divorced, while I was on active duty. Dad was working, doing stuff. He'd gotten remarried, and I really didn't want any part of that, at that point. So I just stayed away from him. [I] just did my own thing. I figured, it's my life; I'm going to truck on.

DePue: How about your mother?

Perry: Mom was a different story, because still my two sisters were with her, and she lived in Pleasant Valley, which was a couple of miles from where I lived. She was trying to raise two teenage daughters. When they acted up or misbehaved, she would call me in, as kind of an enforcer. Not right away, but this developed over the next couple of years. Unfortunately, I would react to that, and I'd go over and try to separate people and make peace and fix things.

I should have just let things happen as they were, because Dad wasn't remarried yet, at that point, and Mom should have been calling Dad for those things, rather than me. But you're young, and you don't think that stuff through at the time. But Mom and I still had a relationship, despite her showing up on R & R when I didn't want her there. (chuckles)

DePue: Now you knew you didn't want to be in the military at that time. What **did** you want to do with your life?

Perry: All I knew was, I'd set a goal for myself in high school of finishing college. I just wanted to finish college. I wanted to go to college and finish college. I thought…I had sent all my money home from overseas less, I don't know, about fifty bucks a month for incidentals, booze at the PX and razor blades and smokes. I smoked like a fiend at that point in my life.

DePue: Didn't everybody?

Perry: Yes. Well, they came in the C-rations, and you learned, if you didn't smoke, the drill sergeant was going to put you back to work earlier. If you had a cigarette, you'd get a couple more minutes in basic. So hey, smoke them if you've got them. (chuckles) I lost track. Where was I?

DePue: We were talking about coming back for the job and going to school, what you wanted to do with your life.

Perry: Oh, yeah. In high school they grouped kids in college route or mechanical/industrial route. I was a college, so I always had a goal to finish college. I decided, well, I was going to go back to college. While I was in Vietnam, I had written the admissions people at Augustana College, here in the area, and had gotten a letter back from the admissions people saying, "Yeah, not a problem. When you get back, come on in and see us. We'll get you enrolled, no questions asked." I'd explained to them that I'd had some other stuff down at Texas Western that hadn't gone well. [They] said, "Never mind."

So I got home and like I said, I'd sent my money home. I'd told Pam, before I left, "Set that money aside, because we'll use it when I get back, because I'm going to go to college, potentially." I didn't know for sure, but I said, "If you need to use some of the money, fine." But, to make a long story short, I got home, and after a couple of days I said, "I'm going to go down to the bank to see how much is in the account, so I can figure out what I'm going to do working and that sort of stuff, how I'm going to get through school, because I'd like to get signed up as soon as possible and get enrolled in college."

She kind of looked at me, and said, "Well, you don't want to do that, because there's no money in the account." I said, "Excuse me? What the hell happened to the money?" "Well you know, you told me if I needed it to use it…" Well, I didn't expect it all to be gone, but that's how it worked. I remember telling her, I said, "You know what? I don't care if you have to work two jobs, and I have to work a part-time job or whatever, but I'm going to college. I'm getting a degree."

So then I had to work a while to save some money. I worked as a stock records guy at a place called Crescent Electric in Davenport. Worked for about a year and got money saved up for college. I went over to Augustana. I'd lost this letter, in getting out of Vietnam and keeping records or whatever. Somehow I'd lost this letter from the admissions guy.

Well, they'd changed admissions people. There was a new director when I got back. I went in to Augustana. I set up an interview and went in to talk to him. He looked me and he said, "Well, based on your past record of

college stuff and what you did down at Texas Western, we can't let you enroll in Augustana." He said, "You're going to have to go to a junior college first to show that you can, basically, cut the mustard and do the academics."

I looked at him, and I said, "Are you kidding me?" Here's the mouth again. I said, "Look, I've been a first lieutenant, artillery type in Vietnam. I've had a platoon of men under me. I didn't get any of them killed while I was there. I was signed for $2 million worth of equipment. I've had all sorts of Army education. I've done it all. I don't understand why you need me to go over to the community college for a year or whatever and then come here." I said, "I want to start here."

He said, "Well, I'm sorry." I couldn't fight it, argue it, or win it, so I said, "Okay, fine." So, I got in my car. I drove over to Augustana College in Davenport, Iowa. I walked into the admissions office.

DePue: I thought that's where you were.

Perry: I mean, excuse me, St. Ambrose. I went to St. Ambrose in Davenport. I walked into the admissions office. I said, "I've got GI bill. I'm a combat veteran. I'd like to enroll in school." "Have you ever had any college before?" I said, "No, I've never had any college before." [They said,] "That's fine; when would you like to start? We've got a semester starting in a couple of weeks." I started at Ambrose, did four years there and graduated.

I don't know; they had some sort of national honor society for biology, and I ended up in that. I still thought I wanted to go to dental school. I got an interview up at dental school, and the individual said to me, "If you're lucky, you'll get in, and if you're not lucky, you won't get in." Again I went through the Vietnam stuff and said to him, "This all boils down to luck now?" I said, "Come on." He said, "No, it's just..."

Well anyway, with the anti-war sentiment over there, they weren't too eager to have vets come on over to different places. We weren't thought highly of at that point in time. You know what was going on with the protests, particularly over at Iowa City, what went on at that point in time, burning buildings down. It was ugly, and it was ugly at Ambrose too, if you were a vet. People looked at you like, "Well, yeah, you really are a baby killer," or "Did you kill babies?"

At Ambrose, I went to a party one night. I'm older, okay? Most of the students that are my contemporaries in college were pretty much out of high school and in college to avoid the draft, a lot of them. But I was at a party one night, and there are a couple of kids there. The one kid kept asking me, "What was it like to be in Vietnam?" Then the moron asked me, "Well, did you kill anybody?" And after about three or four more stupid questions from this kid…He was just insensitive. I mean, he wasn't stupid; he was a bright young

man. I finally looked at him. I said, "Look, I know an Army recruiter down at the recruiting station, here in Davenport. If you're so fascinated with Vietnam, how about I take you down there tomorrow? You can sign up and go yourself." Well, he left me. That was it, goodbye, no more questions, and that was that.

DePue: Now in your own way, you've kind of been answering this question anyway, but let me be more specific. Did you have any challenges in readjusting to civilian life?

Perry: I did, yeah, but I didn't think I did. I didn't think I had any problems. It was everybody else. It wasn't me, okay? But I isolated myself the first couple of three months at home. I didn't go see people. I just wanted to be by myself. I'd read articles in the paper about the crazy Vietnam vets, robbing gas stations or getting in trouble doing this.

So, I wrote a couple of letters to the editor in the local paper that were published—basically trying to explain to what I considered morons, not realizing they were all part of the anti-war movement at that point—as to what we really were in Vietnam and we weren't and some of the positive things we did over there, like supporting the orphanages and that sort of stuff. Anyway, it was kind of futile.

But no, I was angry all the time. I didn't understand what our government was trying to do over there. And the worst part was, for me, I became pretty much a news junky after that. I wanted to know what was going on, so I was watching Uncle Cronkite [CBS-TV Evening News anchorman, Walter Cronkite] on the box in the evenings and watching the war footage coming out of there. That was probably the worst thing that I could have done, but it was like watching a car wreck at that point. Then you had Watergate kick off while I was in college. The whole thing compounded. But I didn't think there was anything wrong with me, okay?

But they just shipped us out. There was no talk about PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder]. There was no inference. I knew people that would come home, soldiers, ex-combat guys; they'd get drunk at the wheel, and drive a car into a bridge abutment and die. Well, it wasn't until years later, it started dawning on me that maybe the demons…You know, you get drunk enough, you start thinking about stuff, and it's like, "Well, the demons have got me," and off into the bridge you go, a lot of suicides, but they weren't covered as suicides then.

DePue: You said before that you came back and you gave up drinking. Did that happen immediately?

Perry: Yeah. I knew I had a problem. Overseas I'd been drinking enough whiskey on a regular basis that I realized that…I'd kind of had the shakes there and just stopped.

DePue: Looking back at it today, do you think you did have PTSD, to a certain extent?

Perry: Yeah, absolutely. I still think I carry some of that stuff around. I think I have all my life since then.

DePue: Did you have nightmares?

Perry: No, I didn't have that. My wife wanted me to…When I worked at the factory, at J. I. Case, early before I went into the service, on the assembly line, it was good money, but I hated the work. It was monotonous, mind-numbing. It just didn't challenge me.

My wife at the time, her dad worked at John Deere and had been at John Deere and had provided for their family that way. He was a hard worker and a great man, just a heck of a great guy. He was a World War II guy; he fought in the 34th Infantry Division in Italy. He was an artillery guy, and so we had a bond there. He had mule artillery and seven-fives. But her dad had done that, and that's how he provided for the family. She kind of thought, "Well, the factories are still going in the area and provided good money and benefits," and [she] thought that I should do that.

I just didn't want to go back into factory stuff. I'd have nightmares about going back to the factories. I finally told her, I said, "No, I'm not doing that. I'm going to college." But there was a lot of stress and tension there as to who's going to provide, and how are we going to make it while in college.

If you're not on the same sheet of music with plans, then it becomes doubly difficult. And it was. I don't want to make this sound like it was all her fault, because there's plenty of blame to share on my part, but that's just the way it was. A lot of it is how the war impacted young people, not just us, but young people all across America.

DePue: Not too long after you came back, President Nixon decided to okay—

Perry: (impersonating Nixon) "I am not a crook." Oh, excuse me.

DePue: No, he decided to okay going into Cambodia. What did you think about that decision?

Perry: Let me give you another story before we go there. I was a sophomore in college. It would have been…No, it was earlier than that. It would have been '71. The closest thing I had to a brother, family-wise, was my cousin Patrick L. Fricke, from LeClaire, Iowa. He was kind of following my footsteps, got in

a little bit of trouble, scuff with the law, ended up joining the Army. [He] ended up going through paratrooper school, was in the 173rd in Vietnam. The night he left, I told him, I said, "Don't volunteer for anything." I knew his mindset, family bloodlines, there are a lot of similarities.

Anyway, he was with the 173rd, and as they were drawing down at the time, up in the Central Highlands, there were ammunition shortages. There was all sorts of crap that just was going on at that point in time. His company was out on patrol, and he led point all the time. He was good at it, and he was point man. Unfortunately, fate caught up with him on a particular day, and he took an AK round to the chest and was killed. During what happened, he was awarded a Silver Star, Bronze Star, Purple Heart and stuff. It was more than just, "Surprise! We gotcha." He saved a whole bunch of his guys by what he did. But it cost him. He was dead when they put him on the medevac; he died right there.

So, I'm at home trying to put Vietnam behind me. I don't want any more of it. I've had enough of it. I'm trying to just keep it at a distance, and I remember the morning the phone rang at the house. I knew what had happened before my wife answered the phone. I knew he'd been killed. She came into the room and looked at me. I said, "Patrick's dead; isn't he?" She said, "Yeah, how'd you know?" I said, "I just knew."

So I helped my uncle and aunt. You go through the…They showed up at the door at the house. They being the officer and the sergeant, knocking on the door to let them [the family] know, personal notification that Pat had been killed over there. The family basically went through a week of hell, waiting for the body to arrive, personal effects, that sort of stuff. I was one of the pallbearers. I hadn't had my uniform out for a long time. My uncle wanted me to put my Class A's on at the funeral. So I said, "Okay, fine, I'll do that." I really don't want to do that, but I did that; I wore my Class A's.

I remember taking my First Lieutenant bar off my hat and putting it in the casket with Pat, before he got lowered into the ground. But it brought all that back. I was sitting there thinking, you know…And, about the same time, I got notification from the Department of the Army that I had my inactive status, and all that was running out, and that if I didn't do something, I was going to lose my commission.

Well, I talked earlier, that was the first time that I'd really been challenged and accepted a challenge and met the challenge on something important in my life. I thought, "Boy, I don't want to lose the commission, just because I'm inactive." Then Pat had been killed about that same time, and I thought, If Pat can die for this, I can get back in it and at least make it a part-time career in the Guard or something like that. So that was my motivator for actually getting back into the military system, was his death. But it brought Vietnam back. It was like, "Whoosh, here it is again."

DePue: You got into this story when I asked you about the Cambodian incursion. Was that roughly the same time then?

Perry: All of that was happening. I was totally pissed off that he'd been killed. I sat there and watched the devastation to my aunt and uncle. Being a Gold Star mother [a private, nonprofit organization of American mothers who lost sons or daughters in service of the United States Armed Forces.] is damn tough. And I watched my uncle just go to pieces.

My uncle fought in World War II, in the Philippines, with the Army. I don't know if he was with Americal at that point. I don't know who he was with, but he'd always been a believer in red, white and blue and parades on Fourth of July. This happened, and I watched him watch the peace protestors and that stuff, and I saw the impact that had on him. He just…I mean, it killed him. He went into a bottle, drank himself into oblivion and ended up dying of bowel cancer, from the bad habits and stuff. Once he lost Pat, it was like the life went out of him. He couldn't accept it. He couldn't accept the country not appreciating us Vietnam veterans, trashing us. He was angry all the time. He was madder than I was, most of the time, about that stuff.

I don't know what it is; he started going to funerals of Nam vets that were killed in our area, and he dragged me along with him. I didn't want to be there, but I didn't know how to tell him no. So I'd go along, and that further just played on my mind with what I was dealing with from Vietnam, the struggles, the family separation. It was goofy; it was just goofy.

DePue: Did it help you deal with it, going to these other funerals or make it worse?

Perry: No, I didn't want to. It made it worse. I didn't want to be around that. I'd had enough of loss and struggle and hurt, and I didn't want to be around that. I don't go to funerals today. We've had people at church that die, and I just want to remember them as they were. I just don't do funerals. (chuckles)

DePue: How about Kent State? Shortly after the Cambodian incursion, Kent State happens.

Perry: Yeah, and that was big on campus. Any of us Nam vets or military types were further ostracized. So what we did…I was in college on the Cambodian thing, when it kicked off. My best friends in college were Vietnam veterans. There were about four or five of us in the sciences. I was a biology major, and I minored in chemistry. I remember, we had a lab the day, day or two after, in biology, early in the morning. All these meatheads were protesting the invasion into Cambodia, and they had their little signs. They were blocking entrances into classes. Everybody was supposed to be out, protesting what we were doing.

Well, the four of us had business. We were there for…We were paying for it; we were doing it; we were older. You know, if you guys want to go

play games, go play games. Well, there was a young kid that was in front of…It was a set of double doors to get into the lab. He was there with his sign, and he was trying to block the entrance. I walked up to him, and I said, "You either get the hell out of the way and let us in there, or I'm going to break your sign and shove the stick up your ass so far, you'll never get it out." He looked at me, and I said, "I'm not kidding you, buddy." He just left.

That was the sort of stuff that went on there at Ambrose for the entire time that I was there. I got a great education. I had great instructors there. But my college days, I don't remember fondly, and it was mainly over that peace protest stuff.

DePue: When did you join the National Guard?

Perry: I was at Ambrose. It was about the time, I told you, that I was going to lose my commission, and I needed to do something to hang on to the commission. I'm thinking it would have been '72, '73. I started looking around for guard units in the area, and I went to a unit in Iowa. I didn't particularly care for the unit, from what I saw.

So, somebody told me there was a 105 Artillery Battalion in Rock Island, so I stopped over one afternoon. Pete Lundeen was there, and Pete saw me. And then Master Sergeant Miller was back there in operations. Boy, they started talking to me, and the next thing I knew, I had my hand raised. I don't know if Colonel Meredith was a colonel yet, at that point or still a major. I think he was a colonel. He came out and swore me into the National Guard. [It was] another one of those deals that happened so fast, it was done before I knew.

DePue: Did it feel right, after you'd done it?

Perry: Yeah, yeah, it felt right. I had made a commitment that I was going to try to make the Army a better place than it was. You know very well what happened to the Army during the Vietnam years, at the end and after that. The morale was shot; the training was shot. The good leaders had left. It wasn't a healthy organization, sort of like what's happening right now with our military, particularly our Army.

We had an overnighter, and this was when I decided I was going to become battalion commander. I was a First Lieutenant at this point. I was recon survey officer, and the survey guys…I said, "We've got a survey to do, and we're training for survey." I was pretty hard-nosed, and they weren't used to working much past evening chow hours. I said, "No, we've got a survey to complete. We're going to damn well complete the survey."

So we closed on our second known point and got it done. We're coming back in fairly late, and [I] went in to get my people food. The mess sergeant said, "Mess hall's closed." And I said, "The hell you say. I've got six

guys out. We've been working late, and we need food." I said, "If you can't get food for them, I'm going to find a battalion commander. We'll get food for my people." Well, then the tune changed. We didn't get a full meal, but we got bacon and eggs and enough to fill the stomach. We crashed. We had our pup tents set up and all that stuff.

I don't know where the battalion commander was, but bright and early, o-dark-thirty in the morning, here came the battalion commander and his driver. His driver's got long blonde hair, and he's got like these big old Mickey Mouse sunglasses on. And I looked at that and thought, Jesus, Lord, what kind of an outfit did I get in to? What the hell is going on here?

I decided right then, you know what? I'm going to stick around this outfit. I'm going to be battalion commander, and we're going to change this whole damn mess here.

DePue: Knowing that getting to be battalion commander might be just a few years down the road?

Perry: Oh, absolutely. As a First Lieutenant, you bet. I set my goal then. I achieved it. I changed the battalion. By the time I left, we'd gone to Central America two times and done all sorts of stuff that most Guard units had only dreamed of.

DePue: When did you graduate from college?

Perry: Nineteen seventy-four, ten years from when I got out of high school. So I was an older bird in college.

DePue: And you were still hoping to go to dental school at that time?

Perry: I was hoping to get an acceptance letter. I got it, but it wasn't acceptance. It was a turn down.

DePue: You mentioned going over to Iowa City.

Perry: Yeah, it would have been after that. I'd gone over to Iowa City the first part of my senior year. Then, at graduation, the letters came out. I didn't make it, so I didn't know what I was going to do.

DePue: Now when we met in the pre-interview, you talked about the interview for a job. I thought maybe it was for getting into school, over in Iowa City.

Perry: No, that's what this was. Yeah, but I got turned down for the dental class.

DePue: Do you know why they were turning you down?

Perry: I just assumed because they didn't want a soldier around.

DePue: Were they asking you questions about…?

Perry: Oh, yeah, yeah. During the interview, the guy asked me what my thoughts were about Vietnam. And I told him, "My thoughts about Vietnam are none of your business." So that probably didn't help the interview any. (chuckles) There's the mouth again.

DePue: What did it have to do with getting into dental school?

Perry: I didn't think anything. Grades were good enough, but there's a lot of applications, and they can pick and choose who they want. Obviously, I left an impression, and they didn't want me.

DePue: By 1972, '73, the Army was pretty well out of Vietnam at that time. Nineteen seventy-five is when the North Vietnamese were finally successful and conquered the entire country.

Perry: I watched a lot of that on TV. That still bothers me, what happened, because not so much what happened there, but what happened in the killing fields of Cambodia and the rest of it.

Now we're over there, and we're all great friends, and they're making tennis shoes to sell me, here in America. I walked into Kohl's [department store] about three months ago and looked at where the shoes were made, and I walked up to the manager, and I said, "I'm never coming back into your store. You're trying to sell me shoes from people that tried to kill me and my soldiers."

DePue: What reaction did you get with that?

Perry: He was stunned. He was stunned.

DePue: Stunned into silence?

Perry: Yeah, he didn't know what to say. He said, "Well, it's not our store." I said, "I understand; it's your organization." But we're so far into globalism and world markets. I choose not to buy Vietnamese. (laughs) I have no trouble with Vietnamese people. We have a young girl at church who's an acolyte. I'm pretty sure, from her appearance, she's probably one of the boat kids. [She's a] beautiful young lady, nice as can be. So I don't harbor animosity for people, black, white, green or purple. It's just, we're all people.

DePue: I kind of skipped over this one, but this might be a good time to bring it up. In terms of harboring animosity, what's your feeling about Jane Fonda?

Perry: Oh, you knew that'd get me going. (laughter)

DePue: And why?

Perry: I had an old blue Ford pickup truck, and on the back, I had a bumper sticker that said "Jane Fonda, Traitor American Bitch." I had that proudly on there. The battalion commander cornered me one day about it, and I thought, Oh, geez, I'm going to get in trouble again." He said to me—it was Colonel Goett—he said to me, "Where can you get one of those stickers for me, Perry?" (laughs) I said, "I know just the place, sir." So I ordered a sticker for him. I don't know if he ever put it on one of his vehicles in Springfield or not, but I gave him the old sticker.

I didn't like Jane Fonda for the fact that she cavorted with the enemy forces and led to the propaganda war. We never lost the war, we lost the propaganda war. That's what happened in Vietnam.

DePue: Do you think it was winnable?

Perry: Do I think Vietnam was winnable? Yeah, if we'd gone to North Vietnam and into Cambodia and cleared that rat's nest out and Laos. But, based on what happened in Korea, I don't think the leadership in America would risk that. They never wanted a real, full-blown ground war going on in Southeast Asia. You'd have ended up fighting the Chinese and the Russians. Hell, who knows, maybe the Indians would have come in to join the fight. (chuckles) But no.

I believe the American Army can win any damn thing that they want to win, if they have the willpower. It's like what we're doing in Afghanistan right now. We don't have the damn willpower to win the war. We've got shit that wins wars real quick, but we don't have the guts to use what we have. Anyway, that's Jim's opinion.

DePue: So, sounds like you're bitter about the way it all ended.

Perry: The current war in Afghanistan or Vietnam?

DePue: Vietnam.

Perry: Or both? Okay, I'm bitter with both. And what I see in Afghanistan is bringing back a lot of the frustration and anger I had with how my war ended. I can only imagine, forty years from now you're going to have a bunch of young guys, young soldiers, that are going to be old soldiers out there, that are going to be totally pissed off with the system that did this to them.

DePue: Let me ask a few wrap-up questions. You've been very candid through the whole thing, which is what I appreciate most.

Perry: I wanted to be, yeah.

DePue: Do you think the sacrifice that you made in Vietnam was justified?

Perry: I always look at it as, what I sacrificed was pretty insignificant to what the guys on that wall sacrificed. So I always kind of put it in perspective. Would I do it again?

DePue: Would you do it again?

Perry: Yeah, I would. Yeah, I would do it again.

DePue: Are you proud about what you accomplished, what you did?

Perry: Yes, absolutely, yeah. I had good people, well-trained people. We had motivated people. We had a good outfit, good leadership, well-trained. We just had crap leadership in Congress, and politicians pretty much gave it away. Dear old Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, one of my favorite people, "Let's go negotiate it away."

The parallels are so similar to what's going on right now, with what's going on. We're going to negotiate it all away. How do you answer to a mom and dad, with the kids, young men and women, that have been blown up and killed in Iraq, and we just walk away from that. How do you say to the mom and dad, "Well, sorry about that"? "Sorry about that, yeah, important what your son did, but we've just been there and go. We just walk away."

Any of those people that assisted us are going to be killed, just like in Vietnam. How do we do that as a nation? Those are things that are hard for me to wrap my head around.

DePue: You already talked about how the war changed you, when you initially came back. At this stage in your life, clearly you thought the war changed you, but are you at all a better person for having those experiences?

Perry: Oh, absolutely. It's given me a whole perspective on life of what's really important and what isn't. My wife and I, we've got a nice home; it's paid for; we've got all the convenience. Tomorrow, if I had to go out live on a dirt road with a tent, dig a hole and figure out how to live, I could do it. That's what I was taught in Vietnam. You didn't have luxuries. You know what you can live with, and it gives you that perspective, I think. I've lived with a lot less than God's given me, and I can do it again if I have to. Don't want to. I mean, I like my Roku [a brand of a device for streaming entertainment to a TV] gizmo that I can watch movies and stream stuff. But, hey, if it goes tomorrow, you survive. It taught me how to survive…that and God.

DePue: Why did you agree to do the interview, other than that we've known each other for a long time?

Perry: You're a friend. You're a friend, and I felt very comfortable that I would get honest questions that were well-researched. And with your background in

military history, you'd be able to pull stuff out of me that probably hadn't been pulled out for a long time.

And the other thing I've realized, with what I'm seeing now and some of the feelings, it's probably good for me personally to get some of this stuff off my chest to somebody who can listen and hear it, you and me and whoever listens to this stuff later on in life, to gain a perspective of…It's not necessarily good for you, as a human being, to walk around with this sort of stuff bottled up inside of you. I've ended up with heart issues and stress issues. And you wonder how much of that is contributed to that stuff you carry around.

DePue: So why, at this stage of your life…You said that a lot of this stuff you'd never really talked much about. Why not?

Perry: Why hadn't I? I usually don't talk to people about anything like this, unless they've shared a common experience that way.

DePue: Because they wouldn't understand?

Perry: They have no clue. Civilians have no clue, unless it's a military family. If it's a military family, they sure have a clue. I feel so sorry for the wives and families of our soldiers now and what's going on. And that comes from my being an Army brat in a military family. I know what it's like not to have a dad, not to have those things, to be moved every year and a half.

The civilian world doesn't understand these soldiers. Then you see them right now, they're cutting retirement benefits for these kids that we've sent into the sandbox in Afghanistan, five, six tours. They come back, and Congress talks about cutting their benefits? They've made a moral obligation to these people, and now they're going to take stuff away from them? What hypocrites. The first people that ought to have stuff taken away is Congress. They ought to give some of their perks up. Oh, well, that gets in the whole political realm, and we could be here for three days. (chuckles)

DePue: How would you like to close up the interview?

Perry: I don't know. I know tonight, after you walk out of here, I'm going to have things rattling around in my head. So, I don't know if there is exact closure or not. It won't be bad things. I've pretty well, in my life, accepted…I guess I'm old enough now and a little more mature that I can look back on my life's path and see that God has been in my life all along and been taking care of me. In spite of myself and my thinking I ought to run my life, but God really runs things. So that's kind of, I guess, how I'd close it, because I could have been just as dead as anybody else that went to Vietnam, but I wasn't. So, God still has a use for me, and I keep trucking on, trying to figure out what it is.

DePue: Thank you very much.

Perry: Thank you, Mark.

DePue: I think that's a great way to finish.

(end of interview session #2)