Interview with Steve Allen

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Interviewer: Kimberlie Kranich

A Note to the Reader

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Kranich: For the record could you state your name, your age, where you're from, what branch that you served in, and when and where you served?

Allen: My name's Steve Allen. I live down in Newman, Illinois. I was in the Marine Corps for three years from 1968 to 1971. I'm 68 years old. My first year in the service I was out at Quantico, Virginia in the officer training program out there. First, the officer candidate school and after that at the basic school which is in the same area as the FBI Academy where it does some of its training. That's where I learned to be an infantry officer. That's the occupational specialty within the military that I had chosen. After my year in Quantico, I then went to Vietnam where I was a platoon commander for several months. The last part of my tour I went to Da Nang which was a far more secure area and was in the rear. I worked with another guy commanding two grunt platoons or two infantry platoons there and MP platoon where we did border security for the first marine aircraft wing. After my year in Vietnam, I went back to Camp Pendleton and once again served with an infantry battalion there. First as a headquarters company executive officer, and then worked with the S-3 office after that. I got out of the Marine Corps in November of 1971.

Kranich: To start off, could you just describe who you were and what you were all about before you left for Vietnam and before you enlisted in the Marines and then yourself after Vietnam? How did that evolution occur? Do you think those two people were different at all? If they were, could you describe that?

Allen: I grew up on a small farm. Half the kids at my small high school did. Back in those days, the farms were a lot smaller. They were truly family farms, did all the typical things of a farm at that time. We had milk cattle, hogs and chickens. We raised most of our own food for our family. I went to a small high school and played football and basketball there. I ran the woods and the creek with my cousins. We did a lot of camping, a lot of hunting. I was very much an outdoor person at that time, and I still am to a certain extent. After high school, I was 17 when I graduated, and I wanted to join the Marine Corps at that time. My folks didn't think it was a great idea and said why don't you try college instead and then see what you think?

I went to Eastern. I graduated from there in 1968 and then immediately went to the Marine Corps and signed up at that time. I had a great time at Eastern. It was a great college. I was in every co-curricular activity I could get in from radio as a matter of fact, performing arts to music. I was always in music there. I did a lot of intermural sports and was in student government. As a matter of fact, I was a student senator when Jim Edgar was the President of the Senate at that time. He was really a class act. He was far beyond most of us in terms of his majority even at that time. Then I went to the service.

As far as contrasting who I was when I went to the service to who I came back as, I came back from the service certainly with a little more edge to how I felt about life. Fortunately, I think for me, I was pretty much the same person because I came back to a nurturing environment. I was already married, had a child, and had a very supportive family: mother, father, brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts and uncles. We were really a tight-knit family. Also, a church family that was very supportive. I think my basic faith made a lot of difference in the fact that the Vietnam experience really did not up-end me that bad. Certainly I did a lot of grieving for the people I lost. To this day, those people are dear to me. But in terms of my core personality, I don't think it changed that much, but I certainly matured in some ways. Especially in terms of being able to take a task and take command of the task and be responsible for it and follow it through and see it to its conclusion. I think that's probably one of the best things the Marine Corps did for me.

Kranich: You referenced that before you left for Vietnam you were already married and had a child. Could you describe what it's like to come back from war and have a small child?

Allen: When I left for Vietnam, my wife and I got married just as soon as I graduated. Then we had the baby about five months before I left, so I had already had enough time with this little guy to just really bond. It's so hard to

leave your wife, your family, your other friends, and the life that you know behind to go away for a year, but I think the toughest thing for me was to go away and leave that little guy. The next time I saw him, he was about nine months old. I met my wife on R and R in Hawaii. I was very fortunate in that my son at that age of nine months took his first step while I was with him. That was a real treat. Of course, after I came back, after the full year in the fall of 1970, he didn't know me from Adam, but it didn't take long to pick right back up where we were. The unfortunate downside of that is that my wife lived with her parents during the year I was in Vietnam, and they became so attached to that little boy that it just about broke their hearts when we moved out to California and took their baby away from them. It's certainly something I understand.

Kranich: I know you referenced a little bit the fact that you came from a Christian household. Could you speak a little bit about what faith meant to you when you were in Vietnam?

Allen: Thank you for asking that question. My faith was critical not only to my survival but I feel strongly to the survival of my men. I have a platoon picture of my guys. Of course, guys were in and out all the time. There were guys getting wounded. There were guys with malaria, dysentery. People going on R and R or rotating back home. You never had your full contingent with you. We were supposed to have between forty and fifty people with us at all times, and we rarely had more than a couple dozen. In that time that I was actually the platoon commander, I had men very badly wounded but never had one killed. By the time I left Vietnam, at least seven of those that I know of were killed in action. Of course, I prayed and prayed strongly every night and every day. As you go out on patrol, you're afraid. You're afraid every night, and if you're in a situation where there's been a lot of action you walk around wondering if you have a target on your back or in the middle of your forehead. My faith kept me steady. My relationship with Christ became far more real. It's said in the Bible that God is a spirit, and those that worship Him must worship Him in spirit and in truth. Well, I finally figured out what that means. He's not Santa Claus that comes around and hands you a miracle here or there as you ask for them, but His presence is there. If you have the right kind of faith, then He takes care of things. That kind of faith was seeded to me by my parents and typical Sunday school learning and things of that nature, but it matured greatly and took on an entirely different form when I started living it. I think that's one of the things that helped me make good moral decisions as a platoon commander. Certainly, there were some terrible things that happened in Vietnam. Some of our people made bad choices and became even war criminals. I'm here to tell you that's a rare thing in my experience. For the most part, my men were very compassionate. The American GI, the American Marine tends to love kids. They're good guys that tend to hate bullies. We saw some of the devastating things that the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese did to people over there. It was heart-wrenching. For the most part, like I say, our guys were very good to the people. At least when we were out in the field.

My corpsmen were always ready to take care of the indigenous people. You know giving them medicine, treating wounds, ear infections, it's a litany of things that they did. We carried around sea rations. That's what we ate plus the rice that we captured at different places. Like I say, that was our diet. If you didn't have it on your back, you weren't going to eat that day. Despite that, we would go into places way out in areas that were called free fire zones that anybody out there is supposed to be the enemy, well there people who had not vacated. It was very obvious that they were not combatants. My guys would share their rations with them knowing that they may go hungry for a day or two. That was not an uncommon occurrence. I think my personal morality, it's not perfect don't get me wrong, but what was good in me, I think my Christian faith was at the center of that. I saw that in reflected in a lot of my other troupes. I think that's a real strength.

Kranich: Going off of your men's interactions with the locals, did you ever encounter any fear from the local Vietnamese people when you guys encountered them?

Allen: Yes. The Vietnamese people had every right to be fearful of the Americans, of the South Vietnamese forces, of the Korean Marines, of the NVA, and of the VC because whenever battle was engaged, if shots rang out, if an explosion went off, the bullets started flying and they could be pretty indiscriminate. Now the people that I was around for the most part in the bush didn't have much fear of us. If they saw us coming on patrol, typically there didn't seem to be much fear. As a matter of fact, the kids from those villages would come out begging for candy or cigarettes or whatever they could get. I'm talking five and six year olds begging for cigarettes. I didn't see a whole lot of that myself. I have no doubt that it happened in different places in Vietnam, perhaps where the American troupes had a different attitude. I do know that, I'll give you an example of one of the things that happened.

One time we were patrolling through, I think it was Santana Valley, but it way out there where the bad guys are. This young girl came down from out of the hills there running toward our platoon. It was rainy and cold. You don't think of Vietnam as cold, but it could be. She ran to us. It was a girl that they had come through her village. The NVA had and took some of their people. She was being used as a porter and pretty much I think as a sex slave as well. We took her into our platoon, and whenever we could get a med-evac chopper in then we flew her out to safety. I don't think we hear a whole lot about the atrocities that the North did. I think it's good that whatever atrocities the Americans were involved in and responsible for, it's very good that they be examined and the people be punished harshly for those kinds of criminal acts. However, I can tell you this from my experience what we did paled in comparison to what the North Vietnamese Army did and what the Vietcong did to those people. Did I answer your question?

Kranich: Going back to when you decided to enlist in the military, you said it was something you wanted to do when you were 17 years-old, but you waited a few years. Why did you have such a desire to join?

Allen: You know what? And that changed a lot. I'm glad you asked that question. By the time I was 17 and the time I was 21 when I actually went in, as a matter of fact had just turned 22. Of course in 1964 when I graduated from high school, Vietnam was a blip on the screen. By 1968 when I went in, we'd been through Tet, major battles, thousands of lives lost by that time, all of the politics swirling on both sides, and anybody that went into that without reservations was not a thinking person. When I was 17, I was gung-ho. I was a child of a World War II father. There were five boys in my father's family, and four of them were in the service during World War II. We played good guys against the bad guys all the time when I was growing up because there was World War II. Then there was the Korean War, so during my developmental years being a solider, being a soldier, an airman or a Marine, that was something that guys wanted to do to protect the country as part of the patriotism and loyalty America stood for. I carried that with me through the sixties and continue to be a patriot. That doesn't mean I didn't question whether what we were doing was right or wrong.

I just finished a book by a friend of mine, just finished reading it yesterday. He was in my class out at Quantico. He wrote it about a Marine second lieutenant in Vietnam, and the guy with all the questions of right or wrong, good or bad. Coming back as a Vietnam Veteran Against the War, do you protest? Do you hold true? Those questions all came to me, too. Was what I was doing an immoral enterprise? Those questions ring with me today. I still feel that if we had kept our course there, certainly militarily we won every major engagement that we were ever in. Militarily, we really just kicked the butts of our enemy, but politically we certainly didn't. I think we could have a North Vietnam and a South Vietnam much like we have a North Korea and South Korea today, but we did not have the will or stamina to do that. Nor do I think that we had the vision to do that. Certainly, we had a very corrupt government in South Vietnam which stood in the way of that as well as people back here who got to the point where it became impossible for us to win that war even though their leaders, General Jap and others later on, said that they were within days of capitulating if we had just stayed with it. A lesson we must learn from that. I was out in Washington D.C. at the amphitheater in Arlington cemetery when Caspar Weinberger spoke. There were I suppose a couple thousand troupes in there at the time because we were out there for the dedication of the Vietnam wall. He said, "Never again must this country engage in a war that it doesn't intend to win." I'm paraphrasing. That place went crazy because all the guys knew that we had been sold short. That's painful to think about that. When I have seven guys that were close to me in a relationship you don't have outside of combat, when their names are on that wall, you have to question this country's resolve. To try and never make the

mistake again of being involved in something that you intend to follow through with. Getting a little preachy there I guess.

Kranich: With those seven men, what was it like losing them in Vietnam?

Allen: Well the first three, like I say, this was after I was gone. A couple of them happened just two or three days after I left. One of them was my platoon radio man, a kid named Tommy Smith. He was just a terrific Marine. As a matter of fact, anybody that stayed in the bush anytime at all, they were brave and pretty selfless people. They bought into the brotherhood. Anybody that couldn't hack it, they were gone in two or three weeks or two or three days. You know, we didn't want them there if you weren't going to protect your brother. Everybody was scared, but if you couldn't control your fear and manage your fear then you were a liability to the outfit. When Smitty was killed, he was the first one whose body I identified. He was like a little brother to me, if you can imagine. Week upon week he was my radio man, so we were rarely ever more than a couple arm lengths apart. When we'd build a hooch out of our ponchos, we were hooch-mates. We ate together. We traveled right next to each other. We got shot at together. We took care of each other. I feel certain that he saved my life once or twice. I was there to protect him, too. When I saw him at gray's registration just lying on a table, to this day it bothers me, not like it did then. Then there was a string of those guys, and I had to identify the body of two or three of them. It was always a hard job and something you never forget because they were a different kind of family, but they were family. The experiences you go through in a war situation when you're actually in combat, the way you rely on one another, the crazy humor that you have, the black humor, and the way that we realized a lot of that tension was sometimes absolutely nutty. It goes beyond what the boys at the frat house do. You just build such a common bond that nothing else in life will ever be quite like it. There's nobody that I love more than my wife, my children, and my grandchildren, and my brothers and sisters, and relative, and my other friends I have in my church, but once again there's this piece over here that nobody can ever touch in terms of how I feel about those people.

Kranich: Can you provide me an example? You have to go id these bodies. Can you take me into that moment?

Allen: Of course I was coming from the bush, and I came back there. When you came back to the rear in Da Nang, it was pretty safe back there. You didn't have to worry about getting shot at. That was strange because you still have your guard up. I went to where graves registration is, and there's guys there. Those are just Marines that got stuck with this job. They have a lot of different bodies, and you can imagine some of them are badly torn up. These guys were very respectful. They understood my grief. I was fortunate in that I had one of my friends that I went through the training at Quantico with was with the jag office. He was a lawyer with Judge Advocate General's office in Da Nang. Of course, I saw my buddy there. Like I say, those guys were very respectful, and

they knew the right things to say. They knew I was grieving. They made sure I was ok to leave. I went back to where my buddy was. He knew that I had been coming back to the rear, and he and his friends got together. We drank a little beer and talked it through. That was a real blessing because the guys that I would have talked about that with were the guys from my platoon who were no longer, I was no longer a part of that unit. They were out there in the bush, and I was not allowed to go back and be with them. I'm glad I had my friend there to help my process it and his friends. That was positive. I came back, and I can remember grieving back home, I mean for years. I wrote a poem about Smitty. I got in touch with his family. That was hard to do. Twenty years later, I finally found his family, wrote them a letter. That was tough for them. They had to process a lot. I know Smitty's older brother told me first he hated me for getting in touch with him and bringing all that up. There were two brothers and one sister, and his mother and father were still alive. They didn't know about him receiving a medal for his heroism. He did an extraordinary thing when he was killed that rated a much higher medal than he was awarded. In the long run, this family had never had a full opportunity to know what happened with him and to understand what kind of warrior he was. In the long run, it became a very healing experience for them. They worked through a lot of their grief. Of course, some of their grief that had worked through before and this dredged up a lot of things, but a lot of formerly unanswered questions were resolved. I don't know if I answered your question or not.

Kranich: What was the thing that Smitty did before he died to win the medal?

Allen: Our company, a battalion has different companies within it, my company was Charlie Company, C-Company. Bravo Company was pinned down at a river called the Song-Li Li River. On one side of the river, the NVA were embedded in there and had bunkers and had laid down heavy fire on Bravo Company. Bravo took several casualties, so Charlie Company went in to relieve them. Well, we started getting chopped apart too. Now there was a place where they could cross. It was like river, little island, river. I'm not talking about the Mississippi River, I'm talking about the river out here. It was maybe a little bigger. The guys would get to that island, and the snipers had it pinned in so well that we lost fifteen guys that night. People would try to go out and retrieve them, and they'd get killed. The only way to get extricated was to have either artillery or something else come in and relieve the pressure. The fire was so intense. Well what you do in that situation they called in the fast movers, jets, who would come through with rockets, napalm bombs, that kind of thing to dislodge the enemy or at least to get their heads down. Problem with that was you have to use what we call a smoke grenade that would mark the area for the jets to know where to shoot, where not to shoot, so you don't blow out your friendly forces and you actually hit the enemy. The fire was so intense that it seemed almost impossible for anybody to be able to take that smoke grenade and go out there. I have a copy I think with me of the Bronze Star citation he got. Smitty told the company commander, "I

will do this. I can do this." He took off his radio, took off his pack, grabbed the smoke grenades, ran out and fully exposed himself, threw the grenade successfully marking the territory and took a bullet through the chest. He died on the helicopter on the way in. I was back in the battalion rear listening to all this on the radio and just had a real hard time with that because I felt like I should have been out there with those guys. I had requested to stay with the platoon, but the orders from headquarters said no, he's going back to a new job. That was real, real hard for me, but Smitty was truly a hero. The jets came in. The situation got a lot better, and our guys got extricated. Once again, I don't think he was taken care of properly there. I think that deserved the Silver Star or Navy Cross. That was not only a heroic act on his part and a selfless heroic act, it was also a very successful endeavor. He accomplished the mission that nobody else was going to do.

Kranich: Looking back on Smitty's death and your experience particularly in the moment hearing it on the radio, with forty plus years gone by, what does that mean to you now? How do feel looking back on it?

Allen: Oh, I've adjusted well to that. You're not going to change it. Once again you have to have faith that you know God has the answers. I might know them someday. I might not. I feel that Smitty's taken care. It's so unfortunate that his family had to have the grief that they had. His sister did a magnificent thing for all of my Marines. In 1991, when she had found out, once I had contacted her and she found out all of this, she started putting together a reunion for my Marines. I didn't know where any of these guys were. She worked hard, and she and her husband and her family went to a lot of expense, endless hours of their time and their money to bring us together as a platoon. Since then we have met at different times, different places. One year we met out at Washington, D.C. and all visited the wall together, went to the Vietnam Memorial together. Without her effort and her compassion, that would have never have happened. I can't tell you how healing that experience was for all of us. Not only that, but to be able to get together in civilian life after all those years and feel that bond was still there. It's a wonderful thing that she did.

Kranich: In particular with your reunion in D.C., can you talk a little bit about what that was like having the majority of your company with you at the Vietnam wall?

Allen: We must have had twenty guys, maybe two dozen. I don't know. A lot of us were able to be there, including one of the platoon commanders that came after I was gone that my guys had a lot of respect for. We met there in the Mall, and it was a nice summer day. We got together, had our own little memorial, and then started to match up to the Wall together. One of the security people says you can't walk across that grass. They had a little rope there. I thought if we can't, who the hell can? It was so petty. We weren't disturbing anything. I understand they have their rules. It's too bad they didn't understand what we were about and the fact that we were just going up there to pay respects to our buddies whose names were on that wall. The Wall was

one of the most healing experiences I've ever had in terms of Vietnam and what it represented. When it first came out, of course that was a very controversial thing. Maya Lin is the one who designed it, and there were all kinds of controversy. Oh gee wiz, everybody gets these huge heroic monuments and did the Vietnam veteran get? A slash in the ground with a big slab of black marble. You know what? The impact of that is amazing. I don't know if the designers and builders knew the impact it would have, if they were that prophetic, but it certainly does its job. As far as I'm concerned, as far as most of my guys are concerned, as you walk down into the middle of that it envelops you. To see those names up there, to see your own reflection and the reflection of your loved ones up there, I don't know. There's something pretty special about it. The big thing is there's a place to focus our grief and our love. Maybe it can be a boulder or a tree and do the same thing. I don't know, but the energy it had, the power of healing it had, I think was primarily because of the grief, the compassion, the love, and the loyalty that we all felt that we bring in there. That's not just true for the Vietnam veteran. It's true for the Vietnam veteran's family. The wife who the husband didn't come home. The mothers, fathers, sisters, brother, aunts, uncles, cousins. The people who lost people dear to them. When they come into that place, they're coming in with a heavy heart and wanting some kind of absolution. I think that that internal spiritual energy is maybe what brings about such a cathartic experience for the people who are there.

Kranich: Bringing it back to your time in college, the fact that you graduated college before you joined the Marines, can you speak a little bit about what that was like? The fact that you had a college degree going into the Marines, what that allowed you to do?

Allen: First of all, let me tell you I was amazed that I graduated from college. In high school, yeah I was the first member of my family to graduate from college. I wasn't really on the ticket. I loved to farm, but going to college was just a smorgasbord of life to me. It's too bad that it got interrupted so often with classes. Some of the classes I liked. Like I say I did a lot of co-curricular things. A campus like that, a smaller campus, it's kind of like the small high school I went to. If you wanted to be involved in a play, you can be in the play. If you want to be in a musical group, it's there. If you want to play intramural sports, there's a wealth of that. Leadership activities you could be involved in. That was a real time of development for me. You know it's interesting that those experiences helped me be a better platoon commander. That thread went on through because I had a wide range of experiences. I think it's unfortunate when kids get to the university and just are, maybe because of the program and where they are, they're so focused on one area that they don't get out here and test the water in other areas. Because at least for me in my experience, having experienced those other areas allowed me to understand my men a lot better.

We had Native Americans in my platoon, Samoan, Hawaiian, Chicago black guys, southern black guys, southern white guys, New Jersey guys, farm boys like me. It was a wide and rich range of people, and their experiences are all different. The thing we had in common was that we were combat Marines. My college experience helped me have a lot better handle on how to handle each individual. That ironically led to my career later on. I found out that I really enjoyed listening to these guys, talking to these guys. I was the old guy. I was like 23 years-old. They were 18, 19, and 20 for the most part. A couple of old guys, 21 or 22 you know. They didn't have much direction in their lives. Several of them never graduated from high school. I would talk to them about what they're going to do when we're done with this? You've got an incredible foundation now. You're going to have experiences nobody else ever had. It can cripple you or it can strengthen you. You know we'd talk about those things. That led me to understand well maybe I could take that into life and do something with it that was as satisfying to me as being a platoon commander. When I came back to the states, I went to graduate school and got a couple graduate degrees in counseling. I spent my civilian career as a school counselor and certainly no regrets there.

Kranich: In college, was there a lot of protesting against the war?

Allen: Yeah, there was. There were protests against the war when I was in college. I have a problem with some of them, and I don't have a problem with some of them. I had friends that were very sincere about their angst, and they detested the war. They thought it was wrong, and they in good conscious fought tooth and nail against it, protested it. You know what? I respect those people to this day, but what I saw a lot of, too, were people that jumped on the bandwagon looking for a good time.

I can remember one time they decided to go down the streets of Charleston, and the people leading it I think had good intentions. The next thing you know they're busting store windows, opening up water hydrants, and acting like total fools. Destroying public and private property, those people I have no respect for. Their hearts nor their heads were in the right place. They were looking for some kind of silly party. To hear them talk, they were just as heroic as the people who were truly trying to do the right thing. I will always have a problem with people like that, the people that jump on the bandwagon and just are there for the excitement or the thrill of it. I don't understand people like that. I don't know how you can be like that. I have two friends I always think of when this question comes up too, two friends from that era who went to Canada. One of them just couldn't stand it any longer, was going to get drafted, did not want to go to prison, and it tortured him because he loved this country. He finally made the decision to go to Canada. I have no problem with him, never have, never will. Then I had another friend who was on the other end of the spectrum. He didn't care about anything or anybody but himself. He wasn't there to make a statement. All he ever wanted to do was take care of himself. I consider those two different people, two different

motives. I have respect for one, have no respect for the other. The protests grew and grew and grew. Like I say, I have no problem with the people who had those core moral choices to make, but I have a lot of problem with people who just wanted to do what was popular.

Kranich: Could you take me into that moment where there was the somewhat rioting in Charleston? Did you ever expect anything like that to happen while in school?

Allen: Well, no. In 1964, I sure as hell didn't, but by 1968 things were getting goofier all the time. In 1964, if there was any marijuana on campus I would be surprised. There may have been, but nobody knew about it. By 1968, people were openly smoking marijuana and doing other drugs. There was so much change in that time. As a matter of fact, from '68 to '71 when I came back to school there was another sea change in the way the liberal attitude towards drugs and sex and the whole thing. The whole moral code had changed immensely in that amount of time. But as far as watching the destruction, I was never. I saw that happen. I was gone. I know this, my dad as a kid if he found out I ever vandalized anything, there would have been hell to pay. I was the same way with my kids. You don't destroy other people's property. You don't destroy public property to make a statement. That's stupid. That doesn't do anything for anybody. Have the courage to stand up, become articulate, state your case, and stand by it. When I saw those knuckleheads doing or what I heard they were doing, I stayed away from that for the most part. It was not my cup of tea.

Kranich: I know that you brought it up just a little bit ago about the draft. Obviously you didn't have a whole lot of interaction with the draft because you enlisted. Can you talk about what your views were on the draft when you were leading your men in the company?

Allen: Yeah, because certainly that was an issue with a lot of my guys. The draft was an issue with my fellow because several of them had been drafted. Now back in the day, the Marine Corps only takes volunteers. Well, here's what I found out from some of them. They got their draft notice. They went to take their physical. They passed their physical. They get ready for the induction, and the sergeant comes through and says, "One, two, three, four, five, six, Marine." All of a sudden they were drafted into the Marine Corps. That was quite a shock to several of them. I had a couple of kids sent there by the judge. They'd screwed up, nothing major. Maybe a drug violation or maybe they'd been in trouble for a couple of other minor crimes, but they were bordering on felonies or were felonies. Judges said Marine Corps or jail. They chose the Marine Corps and ended up in the bush wondering if they made the right decision. Yeah the draft, it touched a lot of people. Right or wrong, you know. War is wrong. It's a real breakdown in leadership. It's a breakdown in faith between people, but it's there. It's a reality. If things get bad enough and intense enough, of course the governments can script people and put them into the war. It's a horrible thing. None of those guys really wanted to be there you

know. I didn't really want to be in the bush. Of course if you're a young man sometimes there's that excitement about gee I wonder what it's like. You want to test yourself. Can I stand up to the fear of combat? Will I be active? Will I run and hide? I think that's maybe an unfortunate part of who we are as people that we think we have to be tested in that way to determine whether or not we are brave or courageous because there are so many ways to be brave or courageous. Yeah the draft was a big issue for the guys who got drafted.

Kranich: One of the things that I'm personally wondering about, and we talked about this on Saturday a little bit, was your time in the bush as you describe it. Can you speak a little bit about what an average day and night is in the bush?

Allen: Well, when I first got into the bush we were on a L9-53 in the Que Son Mountains just over the base camp. There was a lot of action up there. It was cold and rainy. You're at a pretty high elevation. Of course, I always heard going through training and everything they talk about how hot it was and how miserably hot it was. For the first couple of weeks, I just about froze my butt off. You were always wet. You laid on the ground. You didn't have a cot. You didn't have any kind of protection at all. You might have a plastic sheet you laid down, but that didn't help much. You pulled your poncho liner over your head and tried to sleep. Sometimes you put together a kind of a tent. You got with a buddy, for me it was my radio man. You snapped the ponchos together, get some sticks, and make kind of a tent to keep the driving rain off of you anyway. Or a lot of times it was just constant mist or sprinkle. You didn't stay dry, but at least it wasn't beating down on you then. The nights were scary because the VC and the NVA always knew where we were. I can't remember any place or any time that the enemy wasn't aware of basically where the unit movements were. I'm talking about weeks and months. Whether it was in the mountains or down in the valleys, they always knew where we were. Nights were scary because that's when they would probe your lines. Of course there were all the true stories and horror stories and legends about them coming up and slitting your throat while you're right there in your sleeping hole. It may have had some fact behind it, but they were very good at infiltrating our lines. So nights were long and scary. The days, when that sun broke and you broke out your morning cigarette and coffee, that was a nice time, if the sun was shining. Later on in that year it shined about every day and was hot and miserable down in the valleys. With the light came a sense of security. You could see out there, and you could tell if there was anything coming at you. The exception of that was when you were on the move. We were on patrols all the time, platoon patrols. That's when you could almost feel the enemy watching you at times. It's almost like you had a big target painted on you. When thing I worried about was my face, my head. I worried about that more than being shot in the chest or the back which would have been a lot more likely, but you couldn't let those fears control you. You had to go on. You stay busy. You stay focused on what you're supposed to be doing, and you're ok. You function. That's what everybody had to do. Were the marines scared? Yeah, we were scared a lot, but it never kept us from functioning. The guys

where it would keep them from functioning you got rid of. They went back to the rear.

Kranich: One of the things I'm really interested in is you referenced earlier a little bit about the enemy and the actions of the Vietcong and the NVA. Who did you view as the enemy in Vietnam?

Allen: I very much envisioned the NVA and the Vietcong as the enemy. They were the enemy. They were shooting at us. They were setting booby traps. They were out to kill us, very definitely. That's pretty much black and white to me.

Kranich: I mean I'm a little nervous to ask this.

Allen: Don't be afraid to ask.

Kranich: You're obviously a very moral man. You've thought greatly about the war and your time in it. Could you just take me into your mind, what would have happened if you had grown up in Vietnam and were the NVA or something like that? Could you take me into their shoes a little bit?

Allen: I suppose what you had is that the people in the country were like me and my country down there. Live me the heck alone, you know. The VC come through, and they want me to do it their way. The Americans come through and want me to do it their way. Just leave me alone. Let me tend to my rice paddy and my ox and my chickens and ducks, and get out of my life. Leave my family and me alone. Well, nobody would leave them alone. Of course, part of why we were there supposedly was the domino theory of the Communists coming through and nation after nation being overtaken by Communism. A lot of the seed coming from Communist China. Was that a real thing, a real threat? Well, yeah. I think people have played with that enough that they don't see that as a real threat, but certainly I think it was at least to some extent. If I were to grow up in Vietnam, how would I feel about things? Well like I say, if I grew up in a rural area in South Vietnam I'd want to be left alone. If I grew up in an urban area, I would probably be very discouraged with the lack of character in my government officials. I would be excited about the possibility that I'd see the capitalist endeavors or the westernization of certain amenities that I would have. That would be very attractive to me as a young person I would think, but politically if I believed in what the communists were doing to unite the country under communist rule and Ho Chi Minh being the big guy. Then if I felt strongly about it, I would fight for it. If I grew up in North Vietnam, I wouldn't have had any choice. If I was a certain age and they wanted me to fight for communism in the south, that's exactly what would happen. There would be no choice. Does that answer your question?

Kranich: Yeah. We've spoken a little bit about how you dealt with death in your company between Smitty and the seven men you guys lost. Can you speak a

little bit about what it was like to encounter death in the jungle when you guys were in Vietnam?

Allen: Talk about what? I'm sorry.

Kranich: When you were in Vietnam, what was your first encounter with death there? I know you said earlier that you hadn't any lost any of your men in Vietnam.

Allen: First encounter with death I suppose was seeing the bodies of the enemy that were killed, very sad. You read the story about Tennessee. I remember a body being there that day. I mean I can see it now. I can see a lot of the bodies that I saw over there. As a matter of fact, before I ever got to the bush my first helicopter ride out to our battalion headquarters. The helicopter I got on, they had just pulled off several body bags. I didn't see those bodies, but I knew what was in there. I got on the helicopter, and there was blood on the helicopter floor, very sobering. You know right then hey this is going to be a long year. But when I saw the body of an enemy soldier, it was not a pleasant thing to see. I also sometimes on patrol we would come across bodies, not our guys but the other guys, that were badly decomposed and maybe infested with flies. It was never a pleasant thing to see. That was a human being. Based upon who I am and the way I was raised, I had compassion for that. It was not an easy thing to see. I didn't hate those people. I thought it was unfortunate that they were in the same situation that we were. Probably they had it a lot worse than they did. We knew we'd probably go hungry for a couple of days, but we weren't going to go hungry for a week. We knew that if we got into a fire fight, our firepower was going to be far superior to theirs. Death to anyone with a conscious has an impact. I don't care if it was them or us. It was not pleasant. On the other hand, in a body like that of Marines that were in combat, you didn't show any great emotion with that. That was internal thing. You didn't discuss it about gee did you see that poor guy back there? I wonder what his family was like. I wonder what his life was like. I wonder what's going to happen now back home. You didn't discuss that kind of thing. If you did, it was all internal.

Kranich: What kind of effect do you think that had on you when you returned from the war and even to today?

Allen: Well I hate to sound cavalier, but I've pretty well put that behind me. I'm ok with that. I'm not ok that those people died. Don't get me wrong. I'm not ok that there was a stupid war cause by people who don't know how to lead other people that are jealous and envious and covetous. In terms of carrying a load around, I don't. My life is today. I have people that depend on me to be the person that I choose to be. I have pretty well the deep grieving for the people I have lost. I've worked through that. I don't feel like it imposes upon me very much at all anymore.

Kranich: How have you moved on from that? How did you put it behind you?

Allen: Well for one thing, like I say through my faith. Also the fact that I moved forward. I don't want to spend my life living in regrets or living with guilt or living with what-ifs. I want my life to mean something, so therefore I became engaged in once again in a career, in family, serving the community, things that are worthwhile and notable and noble to some extent. I want to have a sense of nobility about my life. It's not always that way, but life has meaning and purpose to me. That is nothing but an anchor. I threw that overboard a long time ago.

Kranich: You're obviously a very Christian man. We know that. How do you think coming from a Christian upbringing and everything like that, how did you reconcile the war based on your faith? It seems there is a contrast between war and faith and Christianity. Could you speak to that a little bit and how you felt about that contrast?

Allen: There certainly is a contrast between what Christ taught and what is practice on this old earth. For one thing, I'm not Christ. I would like to be Christ-like, wish I were more that way. Anybody who believes in the gospel should be moving towards that as well as they can in this life. There are aspects of the real world − the physical world − that sometimes we're not in charge of. There's a thing that's been around, and I'm sure you've heard that. That there are three basic types of people in the world. There are sheep. There are wolves, and there are sheep dogs. I think its ok. The sheep of course is the common person who goes about their life pretty well unaware of either threats around them or whatever or maybe powerless or careless in terms of avoiding that peril. There are the wolves who are there to attack other people. Then there are the sheep dogs who are there to protect the sheep against the wolves. I don't have much conflict as a Christian in feeling that sometimes in my life I have played the role of the sheep dog. I don't know that we consider Christ a sheep dog. He was far beyond that. I think at some point in time, people have to make a choice. Which one of those three am I? I've made my choice. I don't know if that answers your question or not. That's the way I feel about it. Yes, I can be a Christian and still be a warrior if I need to be. I think circumstances determine that. Am I going to stand around if I can keep some child from being brutalized by somebody? Am I going to stand by and watch it? No I'm not. Nor would Christ. Those are choices we make, and taking it to the fullest extent, is there a good war? Well that's been open to debate for centuries. Is there a time when nations have to defend themselves? Well, obviously yes. Was Vietnam one of those times? No, we weren't defending ourselves. In Korea were we defending ourselves? Not really, but that ended up turning out pretty well for the South Koreans. That's a complicated question you know. I am glad that we have a military that often has the kind of leaders that have a strong moral center. I have a nephew who is a major in the Army. He served in Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan a couple of times. Last time he was there he got blown up pretty bad. He's in Saudi Arabia right now. You will never meet a more moral man. He has his opinions about the war, good, bad, indifferent. But one thing he could do, and he was like me, one

thing he can do is make sure that he and the men under him make the most moral choices they can. Some things are out of our control. If you're a second or first lieutenant or a captain in the Marine Corps, there are a lot of things you cannot control. But there are things in a small unit arena that you definitely can control.

Kranich: You were in Vietnam for three years.

Allen: It was just a year.

Kranich: I'm sorry, one year. During that time, you're leading all of these men day in and day out without bathing did you ever lose hope through it all?

Allen: Hope of what?

Kranich: Hope of seeing the other side maybe, seeing your purpose there.

Allen: You know what, that is a good question. Did I ever lose hope or in what our mission was to win the war? I'll put it this way. Your focus when you're in the situation that I was in Vietnam. If you're a ground pounder in a small unit, your mission is to first of all follow orders, do your patrolling, do your job, and then it becomes all about keeping one another alive. Taking care of the man next to you. That becomes probably your primary focus. What do we do to stay alive today when we go about our job? How do I protect him? How does he protect me? How do we do that as a unit? That stuff about hope, your hope over there was survive today, survive tomorrow. One day at a time until that magic day comes when you rotate back home. That's what that was like. That's your biggest hope.

Kranich: I guess somewhat summing up, if you could go back to Vietnam and your time in the war, would you change anything you or your company did?

Allen: I don't know what it would be, no. I'm very thankful that I was raised the way I was because I think I made some good choices that I saw other people not make. Really not that many regrets, no.

Kranich: I meant to touch on this a little bit earlier, and I know you referenced it. Could you tell us a little bit about Tennessee?

Allen: Tennessee was a good old boy from Tennessee: tall kid, had that great southern accent, strong, quiet, a quiet guy, a gentle guy, tough and strong but gentle, a man of faith. I can remember this. This says a lot about his personality. He had been laying there for a couple hours with a bullet wound through his chest. There wasn't much hope of him surviving. I mean we kept telling him everything was ok, but we knew darn and well it wasn't. One of the guys came over and said to him, "Tennessee, we're going to get him. We're going to find him, and we're going to get him." Tennessee reaction was you know he doesn't want to be here anymore than we are. In other words,

forget that. He wasn't looking for revenge, just wanting to hang on to that. I think that was a good testimonial as to the core and the center of who that man was. He was a very good man.

Kranich: Could you tell me a little bit about what happened to Tennessee after the war?

Allen: You know I didn't have any contact with him for decades. Then you read the short story I read in military magazine. Somehow that got to him. At that point in time then we were able to establish contact. I know that he ended up with a very nice family. His wife is wonderful. We got to meet her just about a year and a half ago at our farm when he came up to a reunion. I know that you don't go through an experience without some suffering. I think that Tennessee had a lot to process and a lot of healing to do. Probably emotionally and psychologically as well as physically. But once again, he was a man of faith and that kind of strength is your anchor as far as truly healing. Then he understood too the love and support of the men that served with him. Their opinion of him was very high. I think that helped him get through that crisis as well.

Kranich: I want to throw out one more question. How do you again reconcile the impact on the civilian population of the war? Not that I'm pointing a finger at you guys or anybody else. You're obviously a thoughtful man. You thought through this a lot. How have you thought through that? What do you think of it?

Allen: Probably the most difficult part of assessing war is what it does to the innocents, to the noncombatants, to the civilians, to the women and children and innocent men who just don't want anything to do with it. Unfortunately, there are bullies in the world. Sometimes those bullies are governments. Sometimes they're terrorists. Sometimes they're street gangs, but there are bullies out there, and the worst thing about bullies is they pick on innocent people. We saw of course in South Vietnam, those people were decimated. The people out in what I call free-fire zones earlier on, they didn't have any choice but to leave their homes. Either that or be at the mercy of whoever came through and be brutalized by those people. I think that happened more with the people we fought than it did with our own troupes, but it still happened. The most horrible thing about war is what it does to the innocents of this world. Once again that's why you need moral leaders, not leaders that worry about their own personal careers, not leaders who are out to covet and gain things that don't belong to them, but leaders with true strong moral cores who care about that common person out there. The sacrificial type of sheep dog who is willing to give up themselves to make sure the people are protected. That's the most horrendous part of war I think is what it does to innocent people, to people who just want to live their lives. Incidentally, it's interesting to see what happened to South Vietnam's population once we pulled out. People put in concentration camps, people who were assassinated. It was brutal, absolutely brutal, but the continuation of the war itself would

have been brutal as well. I don't know that any more people died due to the communists coming in and purging than what would have happened if the war had continued for another five or ten years. The bottom line is innocent people shouldn't have to suffer because of bullies.