

**Mark I. Fleisher
Veteran**

**Heather A. Wade
Interviewer**

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New York State Military Museum
Chemung County Historical Society
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Q: Could you state your full name and your date of birth, please?

MF: Mark Irwin Fleisher. May 5, 1943.

Q: Which war did you serve in?

MF: Vietnam.

Q: What were the dates of your service?

MF: Total dates or Vietnam?

Q: Total dates.

MF: April 14, 1965 through September 12, 1968.

Q: What caused you to go into the military in the first place?

MF: I finished college. I was working as a researcher for a law firm in New York City where I grew up and I received my draft notice from the Army. I decided I really didn't want to go into the Army so I enlisted into the Air Force. That was in April of 1965.

Q: Where did you go to college?

MF: Ohio University in Athens, Ohio.

Q: What did you study there?

HF: Journalism. When I got out of school, I really didn't know what I wanted to do. I was thinking about going to graduate school and not thinking about going to graduate school. I knew that if I did not go to school, I would be subject to the draft. And I guess I decided to take my chances. I wasn't sure if I wanted to go to

graduate school at that time. So, I took my chances with the draft. I had a low number and I got called.

Q: How did you feel when you got drafted?

MF: It wasn't a surprise. As I said, I was drafted by the Army. I probably said if I went ahead with the draft, I had a pretty good chance of going to Vietnam. Which at that time I had no desire to do. So I went to enlist in the Air Force even though it was four years as opposed to two years. My chances were probably less. As it turned out, I went to Vietnam anyway. That basically was how I felt about being drafted. I didn't have any qualms about going into the military, per se.

Q: Do you know how your family felt about it?

MF: I think my mother was probably more concerned. Certainly more concerned that I was. I just saw it...how old was I...I was twenty-two years old. You have the world on a string. Nothing can hurt you, nothing can harm you. Whatever transpires, whether I go into the Army or Air Force or whatever, it's just another chapter in life. Of course, my father was concerned. It wasn't a major panic or anything.

Q: What did you know about Vietnam at that point?

MF: Not much. Other than at that time in 1965, it was a pretty low level kind of operation. It didn't seem to be making major headlines. It certainly wasn't anywhere near the opposition that later developed. As I recall back, I think most people I knew thought it was going to be one of these...we had been there a couple or three years with advisors and eventually troops. It was going to be in and out relatively quickly. I don't think anybody thought, at least no one I knew, thought it would develop into what it developed. I had friends. I had a really good friend who was going to law school who eventually went to Vietnam. He was a captain and an Army lawyer. I had three or four guys that I went to college with that I was close to who eventually went. Nobody thought it would have developed and transpired into what it did. At that point anyway.

Q: Did you ever consider enlisting?

MF: Well, I did, in the Air Force. That was as a volunteer. But my encouragement was the draft. Even though the Air Force was four years as opposed to the two year draft, I guess I felt in the back of my mind that I wouldn't be...my chances of being exposed to combat were probably less. Or I thought so by going into the Air Force instead of being drafted into the Army.

Q: After you enlisted, what happened next?

MF: I had all the paperwork done in March of 1965. They said to go home and report in April. I remember I reported to a military processing center in lower Manhattan. It was on Whitehall Street. I reported there and we got on buses and went to Newark Airport. This was after I said all my goodbyes. We flew to Atlanta, then Houston, Texas. Then we got on another plane and went to San Antonio, Texas. I got off in San Antonio and that is where Air Force Basic Training was. And still is. Lackland Air Force Base. That was the middle of April 1965. Basic training was six weeks. We got that finished up roughly June 1. The school that I was to go to...I was very fortunate because the school was located on a little island off the coast of New Rochelle, New York, which was about an hour from my home. It was an all-service school. It wasn't just the Air Force. It was operated by the Army. The next class didn't start until sometime in late July, so I stayed in Texas for roughly a month until school started. And then I went to the school for about six or eight weeks.

Q: What do you remember about Lackland?

MF: Hot. God it was hot. If the temperature got to a certain point and the humidity got to a certain point, they ran up a red flag and they said to stay indoors. No outdoor activity. It was a huge place. I [have since] looked at maps of San Antonio today on a Rand McNally Atlas. I always thought Lackland was in the north, but it turned out to be in the south. Or it might be the other way around, I don't remember. Big sprawling place. Like any basic training, they put you through the ringer.

Q: What was a typical day like? Do you remember your first day there?

MF: A typical day, you got up at five or five-thirty in the morning or something like that. You marched everywhere. You marched to breakfast. Then you had classes, drills and rifle practice. More classes and more drills. It was very repetitive. But the idea of basic training, any basic training probably is to instill a certain amount of discipline, a certain amount of unity with the people you are serving with. We had two or three drill sergeants assigned to our barracks. I thought the head guy was a terrific guy. The other two were a couple of real jerks.

Q: Do you remember their names?

MF: The head guy was Sergeant Rorke [?]. The two jerks, one who was Hispanic and I don't remember; he wasn't too bad. The other guy was Earl Deyo. And I will remember that name as long as I live. Because you were out all day, sweated like a dog, came back to the barracks and he said...He had two phrases. Because,

obviously he knew your background because he had your personnel files. One phrase was [mimics a southern accent] "Boy, you are going to get sent back." He was a southerner. Sent back meaning you aren't doing too well. You were going to have to go back square one and start all over again. And his second one which was pointed at me and maybe three or four other guys. [He said] "You a college boy?" That sort of thing. Of course, you would have to say, yes, sir. He made a derogatory remark.

Q: Why did he make these comments to you? Were you doing something in particular?

MF: Well, you were basically coming back to the barracks after being out all day. You had maybe a little bit of free time to kind of wind down before you went and marched off to dinner. You really didn't want to hear it. You just wanted to lie down in your bunk for half an hour. I'll never forget that. I guess it was sort of standard operating procedure. Meant to scare the hell out of you. Which it did because you certainly didn't want to start over again. But it was interesting. After I got out of basic and had to stay there for the additional four to six weeks...by that time I had a stripe on my arm. So you were a big deal already. Sergeant Rorke, the head guy, came up to me one day. We were on what was called casual status. You were in between things. So they had me picking up cigarette butts. He came up to me one day. He said, you went to college, didn't you? I said yes. He said, you can type, can't you? He said they need a clerk in the Base Education office. I want you to go down there and tell them that I sent you. It was air conditioned. It was beautiful. He was just a nice guy. He turned out to be. I mean, he did his job, he was rough on you. But he was basically a nice guy.

Q: Did you stay in touch with any of these people?

MF: No.

Q: At the time that you enlisted, did you enlist with anyone you knew from back home at the same time?

MF: No.

Q: You didn't know anyone once you got down there?

MF: It was interesting, our particular squadron that was in the barracks; there were a bunch of people from New England, New Hampshire primarily. And a bunch of people from Hawaii. I don't know whether they grouped them together or if they all enlisted together. That was pretty much the makeup. I would say seventy-five percent were New Englanders and Hawaiians or from Hawaii. The

Hawaiians were interesting because they were Caucasian, Chinese and obviously mixed. It was an interesting mix overall. And everybody got along. There were never any arguments or fights.

Q: That is interesting. Some of the stories we have heard about basic training during the Vietnam Era, everyone always mentioned racial tension. Did you...

MF: Not in basic training. It's funny, I was in the top bunk and the fellow on the bottom bunk was a Hawaiian of Chinese descent. You know how it is, you have to make that bed tight when you tuck it in. You could bounce a quarter off of it. He could do that. He was just unbelievable. He did my bunk and his bed and I did something else. We all got along very well. It's not blocked out or anything, I never remember that there was any tension whatsoever. We had black guys in there as well. Probably from New York or Philadelphia. And there weren't cliques either. Everybody stuck together.

Q: What was the general attitude about the war? Or didn't people talk about it?

MF: I don't think they really talked about it. I think you were more interested, quite frankly, in what the school will be like that they are sending me off to.

Q: At that point, did you know you would end up in Vietnam?

MF: Oh, no.

Q: No one did?

MF: No idea. That wasn't until I was stationed in Massachusetts which was after the school I went to.

Q: What things were you learning in basic training? What were some of the tasks that they were actually putting you through?

MF: Drill. What's called the Manual of Arms. You have a rifle, order arms, present arms. Rifle practice. Physical education stuff. The obstacle course. Classroom stuff. Things I wondered what I needed this for, but it was all part of it. Military courtesy, Uniform codes, Military Justice, Geneva Convention. You would have maybe a couple of hours on that sort of thing. Then you would have stuff on, I guess you could call it propaganda. In the sense of, here is what the military can do for you. If you want to make it a career. Educational benefits and this and that. Primarily I would say it was drill and physical fitness stuff and rifle practice.

Q: What time did your day typically end?

MF: In a way it never did, but I would say about seven p.m. But there was a rotating schedule where you would be CQ, Charge of Quarters. Where you would be up, not sure if it was through the night or maybe just four hour shifts. You would be assigned to guard the front door of the barracks. I didn't know who was coming in. That was a rotating thing and you grabbed that a couple times a week. Other than that, they pretty much left you alone in the evening. Lights out were nine o'clock or ten o'clock. Between the end of dinner and lights out, they pretty much left you alone. Didn't bother you.

Q: Did you ever leave the base?

MF: Legally, no [laughs]. I am trying to think. I guess it was after I finished basic and I was there for the six weeks hanging around. I think it was before. I think the last weekend of basic, if memory serves me right. If you had a pass, you could go into town just for the day and you had to be back by a certain hour. They had a bus that went in and we did that.

Q: Do you remember what you did when you went in?

MF: We went to Breckinridge Park which was a city park in San Antonio with a zoo. Three or four of us. You just wanted to be out in the air. Then we went downtown. I was a little older than most of the guys. I was twenty-two at the time. Most of them were eighteen or nineteen. I could drink legally. I guess they also could drink in Texas. We went to a bar, had a few drinks and walked around. I remember, this is really weird. We went to the Alamo too, of course. [We went to] one of the main streets of San Antonio business streets. They had these torrential rains two or three days prior to the day we were there. All these beetles had washed up out of the sewer system. A lot of stores were closed because of these beetles. You couldn't get into the store without walking on and over these things. I can't remember if they were dead or alive. You walked on them and they went crunch, crunch, crunch. It was not very appetizing to say the least. [laughs] After I finished basic and hung around there for six weeks or so, I'm sure I went to town several other times. I don't remember anything else particularly noteworthy about it.

Q: What did you do in the interim after basic and before you went to school?

MF: I worked in the Education office. There were a lot of things on base. They had movies and libraries. Of course, you weren't paid a heck of a lot of money so you really didn't have a lot of spending money. I basically stayed on base. There were two or three of us in the same situation. Waiting for the same school to

start. We hung around and went to the gym on base, movies and library and stuff like that.

Q: To backtrack a bit, when you went into San Antonio, what was the dress code?

MF: As I recall, you had to wear your military uniforms.

Q: Did the public respond to that at all?

MF: The only response I remember was, as you got off the bus...I can't remember if it was an Air Force bus or a municipal bus. There was a hoard of Mexican-American kids who wanted to shine your shoes or sell you cigarettes. San Antonio was and is a big military town. I think there have been some base closures now. But then, there were three Air Force bases and one or two Army installations. It is one of those towns that has grown up with the military. There was never any hostility or anything like that. They welcomed what few dollars you had to spend. I don't recall any hostility whatsoever.

Q: What school did you want to go to after basic?

MF: What I wanted to go to and what I wound up going to was called the Defense Information School. It was in Fort Slocum, New York. It has since moved. I think we were the last class. It is now out in Indiana. It is an all services school basically to teach you military journalism. Instructors were all military from all services. One of them, who may have retired by now, became a professor of journalism at Syracuse. It was excellent, I thought. It was about six or eight weeks. After that you went to your first real assignment.

Q: What kind of classes did you take?

MF: Writing, editing. It was very similar to the journalism classes I took in college only with a military slant to it.

Q: What was the military slant?

MF: Getting familiar with military terms. All of the different services. Because you are in the Air Force but you may deal with people from one or more of the other services. And it turned out to be very true. It was getting the military message across. The instructors were very good. They were all very professional. We enjoyed it. Fort Slocum was an interesting place. I believe it was built during or shortly after the Civil War. It had these huge parade grounds, I remember. Very historic place which I guess has been torn down. This is funny. The Army ran a little ferry boat that took you to New Rochelle. You could take a bus to the

train, take a train to Grand Central Station and you would be in the middle of Manhattan in forty-five minutes.

Q: Did you go in often?

MF: Oh, yeah. I lived in Brooklyn. I would go to Grand Central and get on the subway and be home in another half hour. It was good because you were basically free on weekends. From Friday evening and you had to be back by Sunday evening at five o'clock. Pretty much, most weekends I was home.

Q: How did your family feel about that?

MF: They loved that, naturally. There was another fellow who was from Queens and he did the same thing. Most of the guys were not from the New York area. But they would go into Manhattan. They had that opportunity, which was good.

Q: What was your first assignment?

MF: My first assignment was on Otis Air Force Base Massachusetts on Cape Cod. I thought, hey, this is alright. I reported there in the middle of September of 1965. Trying to remember. Because when you were in school, as far as the Air Force guys were concerned, you could ask for a specific place. It didn't mean you got it. I honestly don't remember asking for anything. I'm sure I did. I don't think I asked for Otis. The guy from Queens asked for Suffolk County Airbase. It is on the tip of Long Island and they sent him to North Dakota. So maybe you were better off not asking for anything. I said, wherever you send me, you send me.

Q: What was your assignment?

MF: I was assigned to the base information office to work primarily on the base newspaper. It was called the *Otis Notice*. It was printed under contract by civilians. But those of us in the office did all the writing, editing and layout. The actual printing was done by civilians, under contract.

Q: What was a typical day?

MF: You got up and had breakfast. It was totally different from basic training. Basically other than the hours you were at your work, you were pretty much on your own. You got up, had breakfast if you wanted to, worked your day and went home. Your nights were essentially free. In a way it was no different than a job anywhere except you wore a uniform. Every once in a while you had to clean the barracks. You got moved around a little bit. But the nice thing about it, for the most part, it was like living in a college dorm. For the most part, it was a double

room. If you looked at the building from the outside, it was a brick building. It looked like a college dorm.

Q: Were you alone in a room or did you have to share?

MF: I was in a double and then they moved us around. I got a single room after that. An older traditional two-story barracks. Both of them were pleasant.

Q: On a typical day, what tasks might they have asked you to do?

MF: In the work situation?

Q: In the work situation.

MF: The newspaper came out weekly. As you finished one, you were always doing stuff for the next edition, the next issue. You would interview different units. We had aviation units. You would interview, for example, the guys who did certain kinds of maintenance. And that would be like a featured thing. We had photographers that we had access to. Typical kind of news. Most of all they would bring in the news. The wives clubs and the various clubs and organizations on the base. It was pretty much constant. You did news releases to the media on noteworthy kinds of events. Medal presentations or stuff like that. They did a lot of what we called hometown news releases. A guy got a medal and they asked for his hometown paper. You filled out a form and they sent it to the Hometown News Release Center. Where was that? It was Tinker Air Force Base, Oklahoma. You sent them the raw information. They typed it up and sent it to the guy's hometown paper. Presumably they printed it in the hometown section.

Q: Do you remember any stories that you covered at that point? Anything that jumps out at you?

MF: Well, the things that jump out are rather unfortunate. I got there in September. A few months prior, they had lost an aircraft. Their main mission at that time was what they called Airborne Early Control Warning. I should have brought the picture. If you have ever seen them maybe on the history channel. There was a civilian airliner counterpart to what they flew. Triple tails, they called them constellations. Eastern Airlines used to fly them all the time. They flew up and down the coast and looked for any, this is the Cold War, Russians flying across the Atlantic. They had this big hump on the top of the aircraft where all the radar stuff was. And the theory was if something happened and the thing flipped. They had lost an aircraft about three months prior to me getting there. In the twenty-two months I was there, they lost two more. Unfortunately in the two crashes when I was there, I think they lost about twenty-five or thirty guys. One

or two survivors out of the whole thing. A couple of them were people I knew. I'm not saying they were close friends. You knew them. You didn't cover it per se but you had to be available because you were needed for certain things. Other than that, it was nothing. Kind of routine. You had interesting characters on the base who had an interesting job. Maybe do a story on that. Nothing earth-shattering.

Q: Whether you did a story on them or not, do you remember some of these interesting characters?

MF: Well, we had a guy. Unfortunately, I don't know why I came back to this. He was killed in a crash. His name was Utz, U-T-Z. He was a fighter pilot. He wore six guns. And we called him Wyatt Utz. He was a good guy. He was involved with a lot of kids groups. He was just an interesting character. I think we did a story and [presented him as] here he is Mr. Macho Fighter Pilot. But when he was off duty, he was coaching little-league teams. There was a State fishery type thing just off base and he would take kids out there. I don't know if you have noticed the potato chips called Utz. Every time I see one of those trucks I think of him. We had good people in the office. Everybody got along. We had a good time, actually.

Q: Were they all men at this point?

MF: We had one woman when I got there. She was like a secretary; she answered the phones. She eventually got transferred somewhere else. Another woman came in who was a little bit higher ranking. She was sort of an office manager type. She wasn't a journalist. She was more of an administrator. I am trying to think. [counts out loud]

We had two sometimes, depending on the time I was there, two or three officers. And four to six, it fluctuated, enlistment types.

Q: How often did you interact with the civilians that published the paper?

MF: Well, that was on a weekly basis. And they were typical sort of Cape Codders. I think we put the paper together on Wednesday and they printed it on Thursday, but Tuesday night we'd be in the office on base doing all the last minute stuff. We'd drive it out to their place on Wednesday, and we put the whole thing together, and then we'd go out on their boat. We'd finish up about one or two in the afternoon and go out on their boat if the weather was nice. We had a good relationship with them.

Q: To put the paper together. Who was in charge of assigning stories? Who was the editor, or who was in charge?

MF: Primarily the base information officer, who was head of our office. He basically oversaw the operation. The senior enlisted person, basically, was the assignment editor.

When I said put the paper together at the printers, I mean, physically. It's not like today when it's all computers. It was offset, it wasn't type, it wasn't lead type. It was all coming out of a very rudimentary computer in those days. So it would actually be, okay, here's the page. So a story would come out of the computer, and you would have to type set it, but not in hot type. They would do that, and it would come out of the computer, and you just paste it down wherever it was going to go on the page. And sometimes maybe you didn't measure it correctly, so you'd have to cut it a little bit. It was more of sort of a cut and paste type operation, is what it was called, actually. But they did that. The physical work of doing that but with us there, because if you had to make some alterations or changes, we had to say, yeah, okay, go ahead. We can do that.

Q: Do you remember the size of the paper?

MF: It was tabloid size. The arrangement was. I think the contractual arrangement was that the Air Force paid them not a heck of a lot of money to do it, but they had the ability to sell advertisements, and they would keep the revenue from the advertisements.

Q: Were there a lot of ads in?

MF: Yeah, quite a bit. Because, I mean, you had a pretty good sized surrounding area, Cape Cod. And the two or three guys that ran the printing place, they were hustlers, and they had lived there all their lives and knew everybody, so they did a good job. They had it, and we weren't their only client, naturally. I mean, they had a commercial printing operation going as well, so I think they did pretty well.

Q: What was the circulation of that paper?

MF: Oh, boy, I couldn't tell you.

Q: It wasn't just the base, it went to?

MF: No, it was available outside as well. Yeah, I would say probably easily six to eight-thousand.

Q: When that assignment started to wind down, where did you think you would go next?

MF: There was no set time period that said you're going to be there. I mean, you were there until the Air Force said you're going somewhere else. And I had been

there from mid-September 1965 through the rest of 1965 and all through 1967. And you changed. Cape Cod's great in the summertime, but the winters were not so hot. So by this time, I would say it was probably early 1967. So I volunteered for, well, I would have had a little over two years left in my enlistment. And probably in the back of my mind I said, I'm not making a career of this. I had roughly about twenty-six months to go. And most of the assignments in Europe were twenty-four months. No, it would have to be less. I guess it was a little bit later in 1967. So I was under two years. It was probably twenty-two months to go. And most of the assignments in Europe were twenty-four months or more. Thailand was eighteen months. I said, well, Thailand doesn't sound like a bad place. So I volunteered for Thailand. Not knowing, at that time at least, when you volunteered for a specific country, it made you eligible for the world. [laughs] And I'll never forget, it was my birthday, May 5, 1967. I was down at Falmouth, Massachusetts, in a bar we all used to frequent called the Harbor Lounge. A guy who worked in the personnel office was there, who I knew, and he said, hey, your orders came in. And I said, oh, Thailand? He said, no, but close though. That was my unofficial notification. I left Massachusetts in July of 1967, had, I guess, the end of July, and took a long leave, about thirty-five days or so. You got so many days of travel time. So I was home.

Q: What was your rank at this point?

MF: I was an Airman first class. And I went home. Obviously, because I went to college in Ohio, I had a lot of friends in Ohio. I decided to make the grand farewell tour. I had a 1963 Chevy at the time, the first car I ever owned. I drove out to Cleveland. I had friends in Cleveland and some friends in Columbus and another friend who was still at Ohio University going to grad school. So I sort of made a grand tour and went home. I had to go to San Francisco to leave for Vietnam. I'd never been to San Francisco before, so I figured, well, I'm going to go out there four or five days early, and I did that and then reported to where I was supposed to report.

Q: How did you go to San Francisco?

MF: Flew from New York. My aunt had worked in the travel agency business. She was a world traveler. She said, here's a list of hotels that are not expensive, but they're okay and they're good areas and go see this and go see that. I probably spent about four or five days in San Francisco before I went overseas.

Q: What things did you do there?

MF: The whole tourist. I did take the gray line tour of the city. I think I went out to Alcatraz and Fisherman's Wharf. I've since been back, and it's changed quite a bit from those days, it's cleaned up a lot. That was an era when San Francisco had what they called the Tenderloin district, which was sort of sleazy bars and stuff like that. I was not a sleazy bar person, I didn't frequent any of that stuff. But this was the type of thing where you walk through it and say, yeah, I saw it. That sort of thing. Museums. I remember they had some good jazz clubs, and that was pretty much what I did.

Q: How did you feel about going to Vietnam at this point?

MF: I surprise people when I say this sometimes, but I was eager to go. In the sense of, by that time, it was September 1967, and a lot had transpired in Vietnam, and there was a lot of controversy. I felt I wanted to see for myself what it was all about.

Q: So this was the reporter's instinct?

MF: Yeah. And I like history and that sort of thing. I never thought of it that way, but it's probably very true. I wanted to see for myself what it was all about, knowing that I would only see or only get a very limited perspective, but at least I would know more than I knew at the time before I went.

Q: Where did you embark from in San Francisco?

MF: This is sort of funny, because you had specific orders to report for a specific flight out of San Francisco Airport. So you report two hours early or whatever, being the military, they tell you to go sit and wait somewhere. So you go sit and wait. I remember they came up and they said, well, you'll have to wait for another flight, because this flight, they overbooked it, the military overbooked it. And what they were, they were charter. They contracted with charter airlines. So you weren't flying American or anything. Some of them were World Airways and Saturn Airways, things that don't exist anymore. I think I was supposed to leave around eight or nine o'clock at night, and I think we wound up leaving at seven o'clock the next morning. But they told you don't leave the terminal because they might change and you might get on. So typical. You're in an airport for eight or nine hours. Wonderful. No different than it is today. So we left San Francisco. We went via Anchorage, Alaska, stopped there and couldn't get off the plane. I guess it was just a refueling thing. Then we flew across to Japan. I think they let us off the plane. Obviously we had to stay in the terminal for maybe an hour, hour and a half, and then got back on and then flew to Saigon.

Q: Do you remember the atmosphere for the trip?

MF: It started out very noisy and talkative and that sort of thing. And the closer we got, the quieter it got, because, again, everybody had some apprehension. It was sort of the great unknown.

Q: Do you remember talking to anybody?

MF: Yeah, the guy I sat next to. I can't remember his name or where he was from, but he was going to be a security policeman at the same base that I was assigned to. And during the year I was there, I ran into him a couple of three times. I think I got a hold of him, just to leap ahead a little bit, before I left just for the heck of it. To see if maybe we're on the same flight, but he was leaving a different day than I was.

Q: Was everybody on the plane Air Force?

MF: Good question. I think so. I think they were. Yeah, pretty sure they were. Yeah, definitely. Because the Army people left from Oakland, across the bay. And a lot of those guys, believe it or not, even in those days, went by ship.

Q: You were talking about the conversations you'd had with this person.

MF: It was just, where are you from? What did you do before you went into service, and what are you going to do when you get there? How do you feel about things? I think everybody, or at least he was, and the people around us. I don't want to use the word scared, but I mean, it's sort of a fear of the unknown. I think we all had it. You just don't know. You read a lot about it and you heard a lot about it, but how much was fact? How much was fiction? I think it was more of just a fear of the unknown or being apprehensive. You didn't have any choice. You were flying an airplane across the Pacific. By that time, the die was cast, so to speak.

Q: Where did you land?

MF: Landed at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, just outside of Saigon. Which is where I was stationed, so I didn't have to go anywhere. There were two, three I think, three major for the Air Force at least, arrival spots. So if you were stationed at one of those three, you just stayed there. But there were obviously other places you could be stationed within the country. So then whatever arrangements were made to get you to those places. But I didn't have to move on.

Q: What happened after you landed?

MF: I remember getting off the plane and it felt like a blast furnace. Temperature and humidity were probably in the nineties. It hit you like a blast furnace.

Q: What month was this?

MF: This was mid-September. Around the twelfth or thirteenth. You got your gear. Trying to remember how this worked. I think they took you to a central, yeah, they took you to a central sort of processing area where housing was assigned to you. They told you where you were, and then they basically told you to go report to where you're going to be working. They gave you directions, and they had little Air Force buses running around the base. If you asked the right questions, you could figure out where you needed to be. And actually, I think someone from the place where I was working knew I was coming. And I think someone showed up at the processing center and said, okay, you're with me, and I'll get you squared away and we'll go from there.

Q: So you sort of want it in a private vehicle rather than transport?

MF: Could have been, yeah, I don't remember. It could have been a jeep rather than a bus.

Q: So you went right to work?

MF: Well, at least reported in, and they said, go get settled and show up tomorrow, that sort of thing.

Q: Do you remember your first impression when you walked in?

MF: Yeah. The command was Headquarters 7th Air Force, which covered everything in the entire country. A part of the 7th Air Force was called the Directorate of Information. And then our unit was part of the directorate, and we were called Combat News. And I had no idea how many people were in our division, [counts] and it turned out to be probably close to twenty people. So I thought we'd be like three or four or something like that. And I'd say we had probably between fifteen and twenty most of the time. And it was a pleasant enough, nice enough office, austere, everybody had a desk. No computers in those days, but you had typewriters.

Q: Who was in charge there?

MF: Of our specific division, there were two majors, and the one major was senior.

Q: Do you remember their name?

MF: Yeah, his name was Luke [unclear] 50.33. He just died a few years ago. The other major was Ed Johnson, and then they shared a separate office at the end of the building. [counts] And then we had, I'd say, probably about fifteen other guys.

Q: Do you remember a lot of them vividly?

MF: I do.

Q: After you kind of checked in there, then where did you go?

MF: After you got back to work, they basically told you what you would be doing. Basically what my particular job was. Well, a large part of it was going around the country interviewing, doing stories. For example, Army people who had been involved in an operation, involved in combat where they were aided by the Air Force. In other words, the message was, I don't want to say to make the Air Force look good, but tell the Air Force story. That was the motto. That was the official motto. Tell the Air Force story. The Army guy on the ground carrying the rifle. Yeah, he's doing his job, but we're enabling him and his unit to accomplish their mission a little bit better because of our support.

So we did that sort of thing, a lot of that sort of thing in the first several months. We did other things. I remember, God, they had one airplane. It was a cargo plane, and it was reserved to take VIPs around the country visiting congressmen, stuff like that. You know how combat aircraft are painted camouflage? Well, this thing was aluminum. You could see it coming a million miles away, how it never got shot down, was beyond me. And I remember going on a couple of things with that with visiting congressmen. Again, they'd go visit. I remember one specifically. It was up in the central highlands. It was after a major battle at a place called Dak To. That was in November of 1967. They went up there after the battle to be briefed by the Army commanders. Myself and another fellow from our office were up there to make sure that these guys knew the Air Force story. The role that the Air Force played in this major battle. And then we did stories on the Air Force, we called them sort of routine stuff. Units adopted an orphanage, for example, and we did a story on that. A lot of that was for hometown news consumption. Or Air Force doctors treating Vietnamese civilians on a major scale. We did stories on that and all of our stuff, not all, but a lot of our stuff got distributed to major US newspapers and wire services. We got back, I think, once a week or once every couple of weeks. The Air Force, I guess, ran its own clipping service, and you'd see stuff that you did incorporated in a larger story under Joe Blow's byline in Chicago whatever, you know. We had access to three or four photographers that were assigned to us. We sent teams out in the veldt. Mostly covered Air Force operations that assisted troops on the ground. That was a

major part of what we did. I had to sort of divide my time into two, because after Tet, which was January 31, 1968, a major blow up, our role sort of changed. We had a turnover in who was running the directorate, and they decided that they didn't want us going out in the field as much as we were going.

Q: How often were you going out in the field prior to that?

MF: I would say we probably spent fifty percent of our time out in the field. I would say from mid-September to, let's see, that was the end of January, mid-September, to probably somewhere in March or April. I have very vivid recollections of the things I did. But after that, from, say, April to the time I went home the following September, we didn't do all that much. They kind of put us under wraps for one reason or another. I have no idea why. It was never explained to us, but we spent most of the time in the office. Except for one month, I went to another base because they were short-handed, so they sent me there. I was able to do a few of the things that I had been doing.

Q: It was never explained?

MF: It was never really explained. I don't know whether it was because we had some casualties from our office. Maybe they wanted to limit that. I don't know. I honestly don't know. No idea. Maybe it was just a change in philosophy and it filtered down to us, but it was never really explained. Another thing that we did, going back to the stuff we did, we interacted with some of the civilian correspondents who were there who may have needed some assistance in doing things or information, stuff like that.

Q: Do you remember a specific instance of when you actually were working with some of the civilians?

MF: Yeah.

Q: Were these like, NBC, ABC reporters?

MF: One was a woman named Liz Trotta, who wrote at least a couple of books that I know of. T-R-O-T-T-A. She was NBC. She was terrific. I remember one night, again, you had this rotating kind of thing where you were with a night guy, so to speak, and she came in covered with mud and everything. I don't know. I think I arranged a flight somewhere else for her. When I mentioned that they had sent me to this other base for a month, Da Nang. I remember Don Webster, from CBS, came into the office one day and he said, I'm Don Webster from CBS and I need a helicopter right now. And I looked at him and know, I don't care if you're Jesus Christ or whatever, we don't have any. [laughs] Those are the two I

remember specifically. Guys floated in and out. The other thing that was interesting, along those same lines. When I went home, in fact, they did this with everybody who was leaving. Of course, in those days, they had no satellites to beam the news from there to here. They said, hey, you're leaving tomorrow, aren't you? I said, yeah. And how would you like to do us a favor? Well, yeah, why? And they gave you a big film canister in a little orange mesh bag that had, and in my case, said NBC News on it. He gave me fifty dollars and he said, there'll be a motorcycle rider dressed in black with a big NBC shield at the airport. When you arrive, just give it to him. Fine. So that's how a lot of that film got home.

Q: Had you heard that that was going on before they asked you to do it?

MF: Yeah, yeah. Other guys had said that they were leaving in a day or two, and they had this deal with whatever network it was.

Q: And all the networks did this?

MF: I think they did. I know, obviously, NBC did it, because I was the NBC courier.

Q: What stories were they working on in particular? For instance, the two that you remembered.

MF: Liz Trotta, she was just sort of out in the field with army units, and I don't know what specifically she was working on. Webster was sort of a blowhard. I don't know what he was working on. He just had to have a helicopter at that precise moment. The Air Force didn't have that many helicopters, per se, the Army had the helicopters. But I guess he didn't know that [laughs].

Q: When you were assigned to go out in the field, how was it done? Did you go out in a team?

MF: Yeah. Usually you went out with a photographer and what they called a radio tape guy, and he would do tape recorded interviews. What they did a lot of times with those is they edited them and did little bits for your hometown radio station. So for the most part, it was three-man teams. I was a reporter. Occasionally it was two reporters. So it was a four-person team. Three or four for the most part. Trying to think. There was one where I think it was just myself and a radio tape man. And they stuck a camera in my hand and said, you take pictures as well. I said, okay, but primarily three, four.

Q: How much risk did this entail for you to do this?

MF: On scale one to ten, sometimes one, sometimes ten. There were more than a few harrowing moments, but there were others that were a walk in the park, so to speak. But you never knew. You never knew.

Q: Can you tell me about a harrowing moment that happened?

MF: Well, it wasn't harrowing. Pretty sure this was November of 1968 or 1967. There was a place called Song Be. S-o-n-g. New word, B-e. Over near the Cambodian border, there was a kind of airstrip carved out, and the Army had some installations there. What the situation was, the Air Force had airlifted a huge number of Army reservists and, I think, National Guardsmen from the states to Vietnam. They got them into Song Be at various stages and then got them on airplanes and sort of dispersed them to their final destinations. And two things I remember mostly was, number one, the place was nothing but red dust. And of course, the airplanes are going literally twelve hours nonstop, landing, taking off, and kicking up all this red dust, which everybody was covered in. And at the end of the runway, I was saying, a mile from the end of the runway was a fairly good sized hill, maybe the size of Harris Hill here. The American troops occupied the hill during the day. Then they came down and the Viet Cong occupied the hill at night. We slept in tents, naturally, and they would mortar the area from the hill at night.

I think we were there probably about a week, and it was like you knew it was coming. So you slept with one eye open. You slept with your boots on so you could get out and get in the bunkers so you wouldn't be exposed to all the nasty shrapnel and other stuff that was going on. It wasn't a single harrowing event, but it was just, you knew what was coming, and it was not the nicest situation. I would say the harrowing stuff really happened, obviously, around Tet in the weeks afterwards. When we were not out in the field, when we were at Tan Son Nhut and exposed to all of what was going on then.

Q: Geographically, how close were you to the battle zones?

MF: At Tan Son Nhut?

Q: Right. Did you have a lot of travel time to get in to cover your story?

MF: Well, yeah, several hours.

Q: How did you usually go in? By jeep?

MF: No. Well, we flew into the nearest base. You sort of made your own arrangements. Sometimes the arrangements were made for you. Other times they said, make your own arrangements. You went out to the flight line, and you went

up to the air operations desk and asked, do you have anything going to such and such place? Do you have any room? They were cargo planes. They said, go check with the loadmaster, who would be the senior enlisted guy in charge of the aircraft. Generally, they said, yeah, jump aboard. Your name was never on a passenger manifest or a crew manifest. So God forbid if the thing was shot down, [they would ask] who's that? And then from there, you had primarily a jeep or truck to get into where you were going.

Q: Did you have to drive or did someone drive you?

MF: Both, I guess. And there were humorous things, too. When we were coming back from Song Be, we had to make our own way, and there were two of us for that one.

And we went from Song Be to a place called Da Lat, D-A-L-A-T which is up in the highlands. And in its day, apparently, it was the summer home of the emperor of Vietnam. It was much cooler up there and it had this huge vegetable growing area. And again, as I said, we were covered with this red dust, and we went up to the crew of this cargo plane and said, hey, you guys going to Tan Son Nhut? Can we bum a ride? And they said, yeah, sure, no problem. So we were waiting for them to get all set and everything, and one of the guys came back and said, jeez, guys, I'm sorry, can't take you. I said, what the story...is they had pallets of lettuce for general officers, no doubt. So one of my great war stories is being bumped by a pallet of lettuce. We had to stick around there for a few more hours, and we got another flight. But it was just one of those things that sticks in your mind. War is obviously scary, but there are a lot of humorous moments as well.

Q: How did you get your assignments?

MF: I guess basically they came from on high. The colonel, who was in charge of the whole directorate, told our two majors what he wanted. The major told the master sergeant, who was in charge of basically the day to day operations. It wasn't like, okay, you're going to so and so tomorrow. It was like, hey, would you like to go to...? I mean, if you said no, they'd say, where you're going anyway. But it was like saying, you know, there's a really interesting thing going on at so and so, and we need to cover that. You want to go up with Joe tomorrow and that sort of thing. You jumped it. We all jumped at it. I mean, we loved it. We loved it. [counting the writers] I'd say there were probably about four of us writers who...three or four of us who got the assignments. I mean, the more senior guys didn't go out. Let me take that back. When I got there in September, there were three or four guys who outranked me, who had been there since the previous March. When they first got there, they did what I did when I got there. And after

six or seven months, as myself and other guys came in, they were still in the office, but we replaced them as far as going out in the field. They were doing other things. There would be times, for example, when we couldn't get back in time. So you found a telephone somewhere and just like a newspaper rewrite desk, said here's what happened. And they sat there and typed the stuff up. There was stuff that you did when we didn't go out, that you did from the office. Certain things that you covered without going out.

Q: Prior to Tet, obviously, it changed. But first off, how was this paper different from the one you worked in?

MF: We didn't put out a paper.

Q: So you just issued these stories so they would be circulated?

MF: We issued these stories. It went from us to higher up in our food chain, then it went downtown to what was called JUSTPAL, Joint US Public Affairs Office. And they would have a briefing every day for civilian correspondence at five o'clock which later became known as the Five o'clock Follies. All this stuff from our office, from the Army, from the Marines, et cetera, et cetera. Here's the stuff we're putting out today, guys, and where it went from there, who knows? I mean, some of our stuff did go to, like, *Stars and Stripes* and stuff like that, more military oriented. But once it left our office, we had no idea what its fate would be.

Q: Who were some of the people that you worked with when you went out to cover your stories?

MF: The guys from our office?

Q: Did you have someone you worked with?

MF: It wasn't a set team all the time. It shifted. One guy was named Dave Lardy. He was a reporter as well. The radio tape guy that I worked with, for the most part, was named Steve Sprague. Photographers. I have this thing about names. I can't remember. Emil Sapiri [?]. Brad. I can't remember his last name. Bradley was his last name. Everybody called him Brad. Can't remember his first name. Rich, maybe. Sam was from Queens. Can't remember his last name. I can picture him, but I can't remember his last name. Those were primarily the guys that I worked with for the most part. Sometimes you went out, depending on the kind of story it was, sometimes you went out by yourself. But for the most part, it was a team operation.

Q: What was the rate of turnover in your office? How often do people go out, new people come in?

MF: Well, you were there for a year, assuming nothing happened to you and you didn't need to go back earlier. I came in in September. Dave Lardy, I think, came in maybe a month or two after I did. You had a couple of people leaving almost every month, and new people coming in. But the guys that I remember most vividly were the guys that were there for the first five, six, six or seven months that I was there. Plus the guys, as I mentioned before, the more senior guys who were there when I got there, I remember them very vividly. They kind of took you under their wing. They were all career [men]. The three guys I remember specifically, they were all career. They had been in the service for...well, one had been in the service for almost twenty years, the other guys probably ten to twelve years. So in a way, they sort of took you under their wing and showed you the ropes, and we had some good times.

Q: Do you remember what you did in your off-hours?

MF: Off-hours? Yeah, we spent a lot of time in Saigon.

Q: How far away was Saigon?

MF: A couple of miles. I mean, we were on the outskirts. The one guy in our office, the guy who ran the office, the top enlisted guy, was master sergeant Bob Knead [?], and he was a very cosmopolitan, urban kind of guy. He had been stationed in Paris. He liked good food, good wine, et cetera, et cetera. He was one of the guys who'd been there for five or six months when I got there and he knew where all the good restaurants were. There were a lot of good restaurants, not just serving Asian food, but French food as well. He knew where you could get a real good steak. A bunch of us would do that and other things. You'd go into Saigon and just sort of sightsee, and they had some nice, believe it or not, some nice shops. This is all before Tet, of course. Buy things to ship home, just wander around. They had a beautiful Roman Catholic Cathedral, Notre Dame Cathedral, a lot of temples, Buddhist temples, and they had museums and parks.

Q: Did it feel like an Asian city?

MF: Oh, yeah. Very much so. That was a lot of what we did, I guess. We worked six days a week, and then there was a skeleton crew that rotated on Sundays. For the most part, I think we worked half a day on Saturday when things were normal. You had maybe like a day and a half to yourself. And again on base, they had movies and stuff like that. If you didn't want to go into Saigon, you could do the movies and stuff like that.

Q: Do you remember ever eating anything or doing anything for the very first time in Saigon? Particular dish?

MF: They had these sidewalk vendors that sold what were alleged to be meat sandwiches. I never had one because the word was they might have been monkeys, they might have been cats, they might have been dogs. So I never tried that.

Q: Steer clear of the street vendors.

MF: Yeah. And you also had to be careful, too, because you were dealing with a population you didn't know, are they friendly or not. And there were always stories about how if you bought a bottle of beer or a bottle of soda or whatever, that there would be ground glass in it. You probably heard that from other people. You always were sort of careful. But I can't remember. I grew up in New York, so I was exposed to a lot of different food anyway, but I can't remember. I ate a lot of good food, but I can't remember eating anything that was really off the wall.

Q: Do you remember what you were being paid at this point?

MF: No, I don't. I know you got extra money for...you got overseas pay, I think was an additional thirty bucks a month. And combat pay, I think was somewhere about sixty or seventy bucks a month. I think your basic pay was maybe a couple hundred a month. So I would say maybe three hundred a month total.

Q: Do you remember if that was enough? I mean, was that sufficient for what you needed?

MF: Yeah, actually it was. General Motors had a deal there. They had an arrangement, I think it was with Chase Manhattan Bank, where you could put so much money in an account every payday. For example, if you wanted to buy a car when you got home, you could put the money in. Then when you got home, you could put that money towards a GM car. They didn't match it or anything, but it was a nice arrangement. Yeah, I always seemed to have enough money. I don't think you ever ran short. You might have had to borrow a few bucks here and there, every once in a while, but for the most part, it was okay.

Q: Did you correspond with your family?

MF: Oh, yeah.

Q: And was it easy to get mail back and forth?

MF: Yeah, it took a while obviously. I still have, not nightmares, but dreams that I forgot my mailbox combination.

Q: One of the lock combinations?

MF: Not a key.

Q: In a main post office space?

MF: Right. Yeah.

Q: Do you remember ever asking your family to send you anything?

MF: I don't think anything specific. My mom, every once in a while, would send maybe cookies or something like that. I don't remember anything specific.

Q: Do you remember what things were appreciated when they sent you packages or whatever? Do you remember what you really enjoyed getting?

MF: Food from home or just pictures or what everybody's doing. I don't think they really sent a lot. They asked me, do you need anything? And I said, I really don't. Basically, you had your clothes, you had civilian clothes to wear when you went off base, but obviously you didn't need suits and ties. Just casual stuff. I didn't really need that much. Whatever you needed was available on base.

Q: Do you remember the food on base?

MF: Yeah, it was, you know, typical military food. It was average, I guess. But there were places on the base where you could go. There was, for example, a restaurant. It was called the Vietnamese Air Force Officers Club, but anybody could go in. Regardless of your rank or who you were, anybody could go in. They had incredible Chinese food at incredibly low prices, and a lot of us would go over there, maybe a couple times a week. And again, like I said, when you went into Saigon, there were good places to eat. On base, there were a couple, three places that had a little bit better food than what the military was doing. It wasn't bad, really. There was a lot of it, the military food, but sometimes you don't want to eat in the mess hall with five-hundred other guys.

Q: Of the stories you covered, what's the most memorable one today for you in Vietnam?

MF: The Song Be one that I talked about before and probably two others. One of them was in a place called Can Tho, C-A-N T-H-O which is down in a pretty good sized city in the Mekong Delta. And the story there was. There were, I think, two, maybe three Air Force doctors who had set up a makeshift hospital in an old

building. They were treating Vietnamese civilians who unfortunately were caught in artillery shellings or whatever. The Air Force or our people decided that would make a great story. So myself and a photographer went down there and spent three, four or five days with those guys, and they were doing some unbelievable stuff. I remember one specifically Vietnamese woman, probably in her fifties or sixties. And this is under not pristine medical atmosphere conditions. They basically reconstructed the side of her face. I think it was shrapnel that pretty much shredded the side of her face. It was just totally unbelievable, the kind of stuff they were doing. And the photographer I went with, it was that fellow Sam that I can't remember his last name. I've still got the pictures at home or some of the pictures. He took some unbelievable pictures in the operating room. We went back to Saigon to do the story, or Tan Son Nhut did the story, and it got sent out. A major part of it was included in a larger story that showed up in *Newsweek* with a small picture of the two doctors. It was a different story. It wasn't combat, direct combat.

The other story I remember, interestingly enough, was, it would have been right before Christmas of 1967. Major Johnson, I think by that time the other major had gone home. Maybe not, but anyway, he said to me, he said, pack a bag for a couple, three days. [I asked] Where are we going? [He said] Just pack a bag. [I asked] Jungle fatigues? [He said] No, wear your summer dress. Okay, I figured I was not going into the jungle. We got on an airplane and headed west. We were up for about a half hour, and he said, we're going to a base called Korat in Thailand. [I asked] what's going on? He said President Johnson was going to be there. I said, oh, really? And what it was, Johnson came to a base in Vietnam to hand out medals and meet and greet the troops. And then he was flying onto this base in Thailand to do the same thing. There were three of us, myself, the radio tape guy and Major Johnson. And we got there and the schedule was that the President was going to arrive on Air Force One at something like two o'clock in the morning. Our orders were, go do what you want to do and just be available at two o'clock in the morning. The radio tape guy, how should I put this in a nice way? He decided to visit some of the local female entrepreneurs in town. [laughs] So he did. I said, Steve, you need to be back here. No, I'm sorry. Let me backtrack. The President was supposed to arrive at five a.m. I said, Steve, you need to be here no later than four. So the night moves on, and I figured, well, if I'm going to need to be up at three or four in the morning, I need some rest. Blah, blah, blah. At about midnight, the major came back and he said the schedule changed. The President was arriving at two, not five. And he said, where's Steve? Well, Steve never made it back. So the major and I went down to the area where

Air Force One came in. And we were arranged in a kind of U-shape. And then he came down from the plane and he worked the crowd. And since Steve, our radio tape guy, was nowhere to be seen, I had the pad and the pencil, I had the tape recorder and a camera around my neck and did three jobs. The major is off schmoozing with somebody. I was trying to take pictures, trying to write down, describing the scene, blah, blah, blah. All of a sudden, President Johnson was in front of me, and he stuck out this enormous hand, just enormous. He stuck out his hand, and I grabbed it, and he started to pump my hand, and he looked at me and he said, where are y'all from, sergeant? And I said, New York, sir. He says, New York? He says, mighty fine state I'm from Texas, you know? I said, yeah, I've heard that, sir. [laughs] And then he moved on. The base in Thailand was primarily fighter pilots. Later in the morning, he had breakfast with them and handed out some medals. Then we did interviews with the pilots and did the hometown news release type thing. Meanwhile, to get back to our friend Steve, who finally showed up, the major looked at him and said, consider yourself under arrest. When we got back to Tan Son Nhut, they busted him a grade and fined him a month's pay or something like that. To this day, well, I haven't seen him in several years, and I won't mention his last name. He was from the Southern Tier, and he used to work here in Elmira. And he denied that this ever happened. That I made all of this up. No, no, it's the truth. It's the truth because it's funny. I reconnected with Major Johnson about two years ago through a mutual acquaintance, and he remembered the incident vividly, as I just related it to you. Two things that stuck in my mind. Neither one of them really exposed me to combat, obviously, but those were the kinds of things we did as well.

Q: Of everything you learned when you were in Vietnam, is there anything that you don't think the history books are going to reflect?

MF: I know this is sort of a common complaint, but the treatment of Tet by the American media was totally skewed. I'm not just saying that from the standpoint of body count, because two-hundred thousand of the bad guys got killed, and therefore it should be a victory. In fact, I just read someone's account, well, not account, someone's view, which sort of coincides with mine. If you put it in an historical context, it was a major enemy offensive that was essentially beaten back. Was that any different than the Battle of the Bulge in World War II, a major enemy offensive that was eventually beaten back. Or the battle of whatever in World War I? I forgot what battle it was. And when you put it in that kind of context, that's what it was. But I think, I don't think, I know. But because of the controversy surrounding the war itself and all of the problems that were going on in this country over the war, it became this horrible thing. We were getting killed

over there. We're losing. And look at this major offensive. Well, was it any different than the Battle of Bulge. And the fact that [they said] the American embassy had been occupied. It wasn't. That is a fallacy. They got on the grounds. The American embassy was not occupied. The famous picture of the Vietnamese, the South Vietnamese Police official executing the supposed guy in civilian clothes who was a Viet Cong spy. You won't read in most accounts that that Viet Cong guy in civilian clothes and others had shot, and I believe, killed most of the members of this guy's family earlier. And Eddie Adams, who took the picture, a Pulitzer Prize winning picture, has said, I wish that was one picture I never took, because the story behind the picture is rarely told. And that, to me, is probably my biggest concern, if you will, about what's in the history books. I'm not by no means whitewashing the war. I've just finished a book that tells very vividly or points out very vividly some of the stupidity of the war. I'm obviously open to other ideas. But I think as far as the history books and looking at it in a very broad way, I think that's one major fault of the way a lot of people have reported the war from both from a journalistic and historical standpoint.

Q: Would you have done anything differently?

MF: In what way?

Q: Personally?

MF: Personally? No. To quote Dickens, for me it was the best of times and the worst of times. And I'm glad I went. Very obviously, very pleased that I came back in one piece, but I'm glad I went.

Q: So you were there for twelve months exactly?

MF: Just about to the day. Maybe a day short, but just about.

Q: Were you counting down?

MF: Oh, yeah, everybody does. Everybody does. When you hit double digits, for example. I won't say double digits in the nineties. But when you get down to thirty or forty days to go, you are what's called a short timer.

Q: At this point, were you kind of staying back at the desk? You weren't going out? **MF:** Yeah, we did a few things, but nothing really major. As you approached your date to go home, subconsciously or otherwise, you tried to limit your risks if you could. For example, okay, you could take a week's R and R. I'm sure you're familiar with that, right? Okay. So I did mine in May, went to Hong Kong. The government paid for that. But you could also take a ten day leave at your own

expense. This fellow Dave Lardy and I, who probably had a month and a half more to go than I did, we got the idea we ought to go. It was ten days [that] you were not here. You were in a safer atmosphere. So we went to Singapore, which was an interesting trip in its own right. So you try to sort of limit your risk a little bit, at least subconsciously. But before Tet, I'm not saying we were cowboys, but nothing phased us. [I said] You want me to go up there? We're shooting each other. We didn't care. It wasn't like we were heavily armed ourselves.

Q: But you were armed?

MF: Yeah, for the most part, but nothing major. We carried .38 revolvers. And I had to be about this close to you [desk length away] to do any damage. And then we had M16 rifles.

Q: And you never were in a position of having to use them?

MF: No, never did. Thought about it a couple of times, but never did. But things that were in the back of your mind. Well, not in the back of your mind, but they should have been as you were flying around the country. And before Tet, where we would go anywhere. You did a heck of a lot of flying. And of course, aircrafts got shot down, they had mechanical malfunctions, but [we] didn't worry about it. And then it was like a week after Tet, somebody decided that these guys were flying around the country and [sometimes] have accidents. Maybe they need to go to jungle survival school. And that was in the Philippines. So myself and another guy, they sent us to the Philippines for a week, and this was great because I was out of the country. It was nasty there. So we went to jungle survival school.

Q: What was that like?

MF: That was interesting. It was primarily what that was for, was for pilots and navigators and air crew people who came from the States to Vietnam. They stopped off there for a week for jungle survival school. It was at Clark Air base in the Philippines. And you had some classroom work. I remember they gave you a deck of cards that had pictures of plants on them, and this plant would be edible, and that plant was not, and so on and so forth. Then they took you out in the bush for a little bit, and they showed you what they called a Three-Second-Molly, which was a snake. And if it got you, you had three seconds to find an antidote. They took us in trucks to the base of a pretty good sized hill, and we trudged up the hill to a camp area. There were probably a dozen of us with a couple of instructors and what do you call them, Moro tribesmen. The tribesmen would teach you how to make, in essence, a camp stove out of hollowed out bamboo.

And we set traps and caught wild chickens and cooked them. We used our poncho to make a hammock.

Q: This was the original survivor?

MF: Yeah, exactly. Then they had the escape and evasion exercise. You went out on your own, and they would tell you, okay, you don't know the country, so when it gets dark, find your spot to hide. But after dark, stay there because we don't want you tumbling down a ravine or something like that. Then they would send the Moro tribesmen out to try and find you. You had two or three little discs, and if the Moro tribesmen found you, you gave him one of the discs, and then he turned that in for a hundred-pound bag of rice or whatever. So you were on your own. So I was out there, and I found what I thought was a really good spot, and I was there. You're wide awake. It was dark. Time was dragging. I needed a cigarette. I was lying on my stomach and pulled out a cigarette, and I lit it like that. [gestures hiding flame with hands] And next thing I knew, that son of a gun was literally walking up my back. But he was the only one that found me, just the one guy.

Q: And it was the flame that...?

MR: Yeah, and I'm trying to hide the flame and everything, but he caught a glimpse of it. And then in the morning, you were part of the rescue operation, so to speak, the practice rescue. You had a big orange parachute cloth that you laid on the ground. The helicopter came up and like you've seen it in the movies, you get in the sling and the helicopter hauls you up. That was the school. I remember when we came back on the plane from the Philippines, back to Tan Son Nhut, we were the only two guys on the plane who had come from Vietnam. The other guys were all coming over [for the first time]. We were about to land and they said, well, this is your captain speaking. The temperature is ninety-seven degrees, the humidity is ninety-six percent and ground fire is light to moderate. And the plane just broke up. [laughs] I thought they killed me, but no, the plane just broke up. So, that was jungle survival school. That was February of 1968.

And then about a week or so after that came probably the most memorable moment of my year. Again, this was a few weeks after Tet. And even though the Tet invasion was essentially over, there were obviously still elements of the enemy within ten to fifteen miles. On most nights, there were a few rockets sent over. The kind of weaponry they were using, 122 millimeter rockets, were extremely inaccurate. But it was scary when you know they were firing them and you don't know where they're going to land. They hit the base chapel, you know, a

major military target. I'm trying to think of the exact day. I think it was the fourteenth or fifteenth of February. It was during the week. We were in the office. It was right after noon, maybe twelve-thirty, because some of the guys had gone out to lunch. My desk was at the far end of the room, and there was a desk opposite me. The guy who had that desk was sitting there. I was up at the other end of the office getting something out of a file cabinet or something, and a rocket hit a vacant building next to us, and the shrapnel came in through the wall. The guy who was sitting at the desk opposite my desk, [gets emotional] he was basically cut in half. [motions cut in half at midsection] He had about four weeks before he went home. His name was Rick [Richard Charles] Ramsey. He was from California. And it was just totally out of the blue. Even more so than what was going on at Tet two or three weeks earlier, I think that struck me that war is hell. [gets emotional]

Then we had another kid who had only been in the country for maybe three or four weeks. I don't think it was the same day. I think it was a day or two afterwards. He was in a barracks area that was hit. One of these random things. He was pretty badly hurt, but they thought he was going to make it. I guess he had really bad liver damage and he died. So there were two guys from our office. We were sort of not directly combatants, even though we were exposed to combat as everybody was. Because, I mean, it was a type of place which I'm sure you've probably been told there were no front lines per se. Everybody, to one degree or another, was exposed to a combat situation. Losing two guys from your office was tough. But everybody just sort of moved on when it was all over. But, in the wall behind where I would have been sitting, there was shrapnel that went into that wall. There was one of these Filipinos, what they called monkey wood goblets or whatever, and that was shattered. So, I mean, I know that if I was sitting there, I wouldn't be sitting here. So you're sort of obviously thankful for that. But it was a tough time for everybody. That was, other than a few guys getting some minor scratches here and there, a major incident in terms of anybody being killed or severely hurt. And it was shortly after that, for whatever reason, they sort of changed the focus of what we did. Even though this didn't happen out in the field. Nothing that came close to that ever happened to anybody out in the field. So it's sort of ironic that here you are in a supposedly safe office. And bingo. Which, I guess, points up what I said before. There were no front lines and everybody was exposed to it in one way or another to some degree. In a way, Iraq and Vietnam are very much different in a way they are alike in the sense that you have a population that was wearing civilian clothes and when you walk past them, you don't know what they're doing or thinking in their

mind. And that's the way it was there. Like, if you went into Saigon. You walked down the street and you didn't know if some terrorist was going to throw a hand grenade in the store where you happened to be buying a shirt. You learned a lot about yourself. I know I did. That's one of the reasons I learned a lot about what was going on there. And learned a lot about myself and different people. That's why I said I'm glad I went.

I went to Singapore in August. Well, before that, they sent me to Da Nang, which was up the coast, for a month, because they were apparently shorthanded up there. So they sent me up there for a month. I sort of enjoyed that, except I screwed up my pay for the month, so I had no money. But that finally got straightened out, and then we came back.

Dave Lardy and I went to Singapore. Probably got back from Singapore sort of late August and came home mid-September. I think I left the twelfth or thirteenth.

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Q: What was it like to come home?

MF: I remember the flight. It was one of those charter airline type things. And as soon as the wheels came up off the ground in Saigon a big cheer went up. We flew from Tan Son Nhut to Guam, to Hawaii, to San Francisco. I was being discharged. Well, let me backtrack a minute. I still had about seven months to go on my enlistment. After leaving Vietnam, I already had orders to Eglin Air Force Base in Pensacola, Florida. So I figured, well, I'm going to Eglin for six or seven months. And then they said, if you are going home with fewer than nine months to go in your enlistment and you're not going to reenlist, you're out. Oh, okay. So I knew I was being discharged as soon as I hit California. We hit California. It was like early evening, and all of the base offices were closed. Personnel finance the places you had to process through to get out. A guy I had been stationed with in Massachusetts, this was at Travis Air Force Base in California, just maybe twenty miles from San Francisco. And a guy I'd been stationed with in Massachusetts was stationed at Travis. He was an older guy and was married and had kids. I looked him up and we went to his house for dinner. The next morning I processed out. They had a bus going to the San Francisco airport, and they gave you an airplane ticket, so you had a flight, and the bus was going to San Francisco airport. And, I don't know, for whatever reason, there was a taxicab there. I said, how much is it to the San Francisco airport? And I had a bunch of money because I had cashed in some unused leave time and all that sort of thing. He said, twenty bucks. I got to the airport. The flight was the United Airlines Royal Hawaiian flight from Honolulu to San Francisco to New York, and it was like party central

when I got on there. I was in uniform and got home. Of course, my parents met me, glad to see me. There it was.

Q: What did you do next?

MF: Started working. Well, I had participated in that car thing I told you about before, about putting money aside. When they said in Vietnam that you could get discharged, I started writing newspapers in upstate New York. Wound up working in Schenectady.

I was home in New York for a week or so, picked up my car, went to Schenectady and started work.

Q: You knew you wanted to be in upstate, New York?

MF: You know, it's funny because my master plan was to go to Eglin Air Force base to finish up that six or seven months, and then I was going to go to the west coast, so I never made it. I knew I didn't want to work in New York City, at least at that point. And I had friends who I'd gone to college with who were working in Schenectady. They were teachers. One guy worked for GE, and his wife was a librarian. They were good friends from school. And I figured, well, I'd rather go to someplace where at least I knew some people. And so I wound up there.

Q: How did you end up at the *Twin Tiers*?

MF: I started working there in October of 1968, and they were bought eventually by the paper in Albany. I was making very little money at the time, and they offered me even less to stay. The editor there knew the editor of the *Star Gazette*, and said, hey, I got this guy [meaning Mark] A good reporter, sports reporter. And it turned out they had an opening. It all turned out very well because I met my wife. She was working at the newspaper in Schenectady when I got there, so that worked out.

Q: Was that [unclear] 1.54.59 paper as well in Schenectady?

MF: No.

Q: Okay. But you did sports?

MF: Yeah. From October to April 1969. Then started here in June of 1969.

Q: And how long did you work here?

MF: I worked till the end of 1988 and then went to work for the county. Been there since January 1, 1989.

Q: And you work in the VA for the county?

MF: Yeah.

Q: What do you do there?

MF: Helping veterans with their claims for compensation, disability, Education GI Bill claims and stuff like that. Never thought I would do it, but I'm doing it.

Q: Why did you decide to get into it?

MF: Well, I started with the county in public information and did that for six years. Then there was a change of administration, and the veterans office was having a little bit of a problem. They asked if I would like to go over there, help straighten things out a little bit? And I got into it. I like it, really do. It is kind of a job where you can get burned out in a hurry. There are times I'm feeling like I don't really want to do this next week. But it's been good for the most part.

Q: Did you join any of the veterans organizations after your service?

MF: The only organization I joined is the American Legion. Because in the job I'm doing, I have to be accredited by one of the service organizations like the American Legion or VFW. To be perfectly honest with you, if I didn't have to, I probably wouldn't. I'm not a joiner. I don't mean to demean any segment of veterans, but a lot of them, even though I work in the field, I'm not a professional veteran, if you know what I mean. I don't parade around in camouflage outfits with badges all over my hat and that sort. It's not me. I'm not demeaning anybody who does, but it's not me. I don't want to be something I'm not. So I have not joined other than the American Legion, because I have to. But I don't go to any meetings or stuff like that.

Q: Backtracking to the job you took in Schenectady, did you go after sports jobs? Did you want something lighter at that point?

MF: Yeah, well, I always. Like in high school and college, I worked in the high school newspaper, and then in college I didn't work on the college paper, but I worked in the sports publicity office. That's what I wanted to do. I didn't go into sports in Schenectady specifically because I needed something lighter than what I had been doing. That's what I wanted to eventually do anyway.

Q: How did your skills have to change?

MF: That's a good question. I think I had to develop people skills in a different vein than the people skills that I had. I had a military mentality, and you were very often dealing with people who outranked you by several grades. So you had

to be kind of, in some cases, careful. You certainly had to be diplomatic. I certainly had to be respectful of their rank. And the fact that a lot of these people had been in service for a long time and this is not their first war, that sort of thing. They really laid it on the line, so to speak. And then here you are dealing with seventeen-year old high school basketball players whose major concern is, are they going to have a good game Friday night? And are they going to have a date Saturday night, that sort of thing. So you had to develop a certain set of skills, even though on the one hand you had people skills, on the other hand, you also had people skills, but a different approach to them, I guess. I guess, too, also, I think I realized that I'm out there looking at a football game or a basketball, but it's a game. I've seen nasty things happen and this is [just] a game. And no matter what the coach tells you after the game, hey, it's not the end of the world. Not take it as seriously as some people might. I think that that's probably the biggest from a work standpoint. From outside of work, I ran into people who, and people that I was friends with that had totally different viewpoints than I did about Vietnam. I should say that, okay, I mean, I got home in September of 1968. So this hit thirty-five years ago, and my attitudes have changed over thirty-five years. There's no question about that. But at that time, I was probably a little more set in the way I felt. Which was opposite to a large degree, to the way a lot of other people felt that I knew. Most of them didn't bring it up. There were no knock down, drag out arguments or anything like that. But I can remember a few discussions, shall we say, [laughs] with some people.

Q: What were the two perspectives?

MF: The leadership of this country made a major mistake in doing what they did. And I probably at that time, took a totally opposite view. Today I think my view is that what we set out to do was, for lack of a better word, noble. But the way it evolved and how things were managed and how things were run, actually led to many of the troubles and problems over there. So I think my view has evolved. As I say, I still think what we tried to do was noble. But the way we went about it. Not the individual guy on the ground, but the people sitting in Washington for example. The way that evolved, I think, was disastrous and led to what happened.

Q: Since you got out of the military, have you tried to learn more about Vietnam?

MF: Yeah. Well, it's interesting, too, because for the first few years, I didn't want to hear about it, I didn't want to read about it. I would say over the last, probably the last ten years, I've read a lot. I just finished a really good book, which was an interesting take or an interesting approach. It's written by David Maraniss of the *Washington Post*. And what he did is he took a point in time, October of 1967.

Just coincidentally, I was there. He took the actions involving a particular Army company. And at the same time, there were student protests going on at the University of Wisconsin. And he just did kind of a double track of here's what's happening in Vietnam and here's what's happening in Wisconsin. And I saw him on television on C-SPAN with one of the student leaders of the protest, who later turned out to be like a six term mayor of Madison, Wisconsin. The guy who commanded the company was very, very bitter over what happened. A lot of his men got killed and ambushed. Could have been avoided, but he's very bitter about the leadership at the very top and what happened.

Anyway, the author, Maraniss is the colonel or the captain who later retired out of the army as a colonel. The daughter of the guy [tape glitch] The book is called, *They Marched Into Sunlight* by David Maraniss. He and the captain, actually he was a lieutenant at the time, of this infantry company, retired as a colonel, and the daughter of the battalion commander who was killed during the engagement went back to Vietnam.

They actually found the commander of the Viet Cong unit that had pulled off the ambush and they went to the site. C-SPAN actually followed them to Vietnam. And it was very interesting. And to say it was a two track book. Here's protests in this country. Here's what's going on in Vietnam. And there were a couple of points where they actually intersected. But getting back to what you said about reading stuff. This is a book, if it had been written fifteen to twenty years ago, I probably wouldn't have touched it. But as I say, I've read that, I've read some other stuff, and there's a lot of good books out there that really get into what happened and why. This particular book I really enjoyed. In fact, I found the author's home address and wrote him a three-page letter and got an email back from him. It was interesting, but, yeah, probably in the last five or eight years, I've started to try and read more, both from a military standpoint and political standpoint.

Q: Do you think that the historians are doing a good job of going back and sorting it all out?

MF: I think they're starting to. I think they're putting more focus on not what went wrong, because that's been documented, but why it went wrong. I don't want to use the word blame, but obviously there were people who made decisions. There were people who had certain methods of running the war, of course hindsight is wonderful. But there was a lot, and I think it's indisputable, that there was a lot of micromanagement going on by Lyndon Johnson and

McNamara and people like that. I think historians are doing a good job of documenting that, as much as it can be.

Q: Do you still write?

MF: Yeah, I do, actually. I do a little freelance now and then.

Q: For newspapers?

MF: I've done something for the *Star Gazette*. I've got a project going with a magazine called *Life in the Finger Lakes*. They only publish four times a year, so I'm sort of off in the future, but hopefully that can come around. I'm going to retire in about two years. So hopefully after the two years, when that's over, I can do some more. I enjoy doing it.

Q: Did your family keep the letters that you sent home?

MF: I don't think so.

Q: You never got to go back and read them?

MF: No. My parents are both deceased now, and I don't recall them ever mentioning that they kept them. And I know I didn't keep theirs. They may have, but they moved shortly after I got home and if they did have them, they didn't survive the move. I never even thought about it, quite frankly.

Q: What about the photographs? You mentioned you still have some of the news photographs. Did you take your personal photos while you're over there?

MF: I have some, yeah. I have some stuff that I took. As I said, we had photographers assigned to us, so guys were always fooling around in the office. In fact, there's one shot.

It was posed, obviously. I had a .38 in my hand, and I had just taken a puff of a cigarette. It looked like the smoke was coming out of the weapon, that sort of thing. Yeah. I don't think I took a ton of pictures myself, because if you saw something you liked, you could usually find the photographer who did it. Somewhere, and I'm not sure where they are. At home, I've got a whole, not a tray, but a whole stack of 35 millimeter slides of various night combat over Saigon... I don't even know why I had it, but probably somebody said, hey, I made an extra set. Do you want it? That sort of thing.

Q: How often do you go back and look at these?

MF: Every once in a while. There's an association of guys who were stationed at Tan Son Nhut. You were talking about joining things. I did join that only because

Bob Knead, the master sergeant in our office, is involved in it. And he and I reconnected a couple of years ago after we hadn't seen each other in thirty-three years. And he's seventy-three years old now. It's hard to believe. He does a newsletter once a month. We had a reunion a couple of years ago and I took a lot of that stuff down. It was kind of good. There were a lot of people I didn't know who were there. There weren't that many people there, unfortunately. We all shared some experiences at least, or common experiences. I probably don't have a lot of pictures.

Q: Do you have them stored in photo albums?

MF: No, they're actually in a big vanilla envelope.

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Q: Is there anything that you still want to say that we haven't touched on?

MF: You've done a good job. You really have.

Q: Did you keep a diary when you were there?

MF: No. I didn't keep a diary. You don't think of these things when you're there. Even though probably I've only touched base with maybe two at the most, three guys I worked with over the years. And in touching base with two of the three, it's only been through emails. Only one of them has been actually getting together live in person. They were all a super bunch of people. We had a couple of jerks over the course of a year. But by and large, they were just great people [gets emotional] and that's the way I'd like to remember them. I guess that's it.

Q: Ok. Thank you very much for doing this.