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(Director of the New York State Vietnam Memorial)
Narrator

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New York State Military Museum
Interviewer

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INT: This afternoon as part of the Greater Capital Region Teacher Center grant titled “It’s Time to Come: Supplementary Material for Teaching the Vietnam War” we have the pleasure and honor of interviewing Mr. Ernie Amabile, Director of the New York State Vietnam Memorial.

EA: I can give you a little background of the memorial. The New York State Vietnam Memorial was created by an act of the legislature in 1981. In the approval message, then-Governor [Hugh] Carey said that it was his hope that the memorial would not only honor those who did not return but those veterans who survived and live among us. As far as I know, that created the living memorial concept. When Governor [Mario] Cuomo dedicated the Memorial in '84 with a very eloquent speech at a well-attended ceremony, he amplified that theme of a living memorial. He said something to the effect of we would mock those who were killed if we don't honor the living. So what we do here is we have a Resource Center which as you can see is the permanent home of some of our collection of art work collection—we don't have room for all of it in here. We also have a fairly extensive print and video library. We keep this room open, it's a very lively place, people come in and out, we have meetings here, we make the space available to vet organizations, we show videos throughout the day so people—pedestrian traffic—can come by and check us out. Next door we have our art gallery. We use the art gallery as a forum for Vietnam vet artists. Many Vietnam vet artists have had their first one-man show in our gallery. It's a very small gallery and it's real conducive to the concept of a one-man show, and we have other types of exhibits as well. Once a year we do an exhibit of incarcerated Vietnam vet artwork. We reach out to the correctional facilities. It's something we sponsor with the Department of Correctional Services. We have some 4,000 Vietnam vets who are behind bars and we get some very powerful work from them. We have our courtyard which surrounds us here on the exterior of this wall and we will have an Honor Roll for the 4,200 New York casualties of the Vietnam War. They will be engraved in bronze and installed in those free-standing pedestals out there. That'll be a big draw. People come to the courtyard, people think of a memorial in traditional terms. They expect to see the names of the casualties. I think maybe the dedication of the National Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington—the Wall—has forever redefined the concept of a memorial. People expect to see the names and of course we think that's a

good idea too so we're in the process of doing that, and that should be available by next year. In fact we've already awarded the bid.

We do special cultural and educational work. We've sponsored Vietnam vet artists, last year we did a program with the New York State Writers Institute. We brought Vietnam vet novelist Tim O'Brien here. Tim read from his works and answered questions about how the Vietnam War experience led him to a life of fiction. It was a very well-attended and very [inaudible] experience. We've also brought Wallace Terry here. Wallace Terry is the author of *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans*. We've done some other programs as well. Last year did a musical program entitled *Jody's Got Your Cadillac* by former Green Beret Chuck Rosenberg. He's collected Vietnam folk songs, there's a whole body of music that was given to the Library of Congress' Music Division by the late General Edward Lansdale. Lansdale was the architect of American Psychological Operations in Vietnam but he was also an amateur folklorist. He was there during the early war years and his home in Saigon was kind of a meeting place for all kinds of characters. They had lively parties and they would make up tunes and set them to either traditional or Tin Pan Alley kind of melodies and some of it was really brilliant stuff in the Tom Lehrer school of social and political satire. Lansdale collected all this stuff, tape recorded it all and deposited it in the Library of Congress' Music Division back in the '70s. Chuck Rosenberg has had access to all that material, he's developing it into a show and we premiered it a year ago Memorial Day. So those are the kinds of things we do.

INT: Could you locate the place for people, for teachers who might be watching this tape?

EA: Yes, we're at the extreme northeast corner of the Empire State Plaza, that's the lower State Street area closest to a telephone company. We're in the lobby. As I said, our print and video library collection is fairly extensive and we make that available to anyone who requests it.

INT: Could you fill us in about your background prior to going to Vietnam?

EA: I was a working class Catholic boy who grew up on Sycamore Street in Saint Theresa's parish, went to St. Theresa's grammar and junior high school and went to Dissention Institute for high school. I was an athlete. I was captain of the football team at DI and intended, it was all set, to go to Brockport State to play football. My coach at DI had arranged a grant in aid program with Brockport State, I had gone up and met the football coach and athletic director and things looked as if they were all wrapped up. Lo and behold in July I got a letter that said they had exceeded their quota and they couldn't take me until the spring semester which meant I wasn't going to play football. Basically the only reason I wanted to go to school was to play football so I took off a year and the next September, I figured I didn't want to go back for the spring semester if I couldn't play football, so I decided to go back in the fall and one thing led to another and I was a

19-year old kid, 18 turning 19 and hanging out, just kind of working a job, experiencing a little freedom for a while and lo and behold, I got a draft notice. I had fully intended to go to college but war intervened. I was drafted in November of '66 and went to basic training at Fort Ord, California. It was during the big buildup of the war, in fact every training facility on the east coast was filled and I ended up going from New York State to Fort Ord, California for basic training. I was part of a whole battalion of east coast guys that were going to basic training at Fort Ord. At Fort Ord I got orders for Fort Polk, Louisiana for Advance Infantry training at Fort Polk, Louisiana which is where they trained grunts, the 11 Bravos as we were called, Light Weapons Infantryman. So I went to Fort Polk for Infantry training and then right to Vietnam.

INT: [Audio very weak.] From what the guys have told me, if you went to Polk you were going to Vietnam.

EA: Yes, they had what they called Peason Ridge there and that was a simulated jungle environment. It was the closest thing they had for jungle training for enlisted men. Officers got jungle training down in Panama but Fort Polk is where enlisted men got their jungle training.

INT: [Audio very weak.] One of the purposes of doing this tape is to try to get at some of the stereotypes that developed about the Vietnam War [inaudible] almost a direct quote from something I read and I should have brought the book with me, was that the Vietnam War basically was fought by uneducated classes, you've heard that.

EA: Yes, but I don't know if I share that political analysis or that social analysis. For the most part, it was working class kids. If you look at the records of the New York state casualties, we have a statistical breakdown of those casualties, and an overwhelming majority of them profess to be Roman Catholics. From that we infer that we had a lot of working class Italian, Irish, Polish as well as, of course, Hispanics. I would say "uneducated" would not really be relevant but certainly working class whatever that implies.

INT: Were you aware of Vietnam prior to your draft?

EA: Yes, I always considered myself to be fairly well informed. In fact I remember being interviewed in our DI newspaper. I still have that by the way. All they wanted was little nuggets of information on each person, likes and dislikes, and one of the things I disliked was Barry Goldwater so even back then I had some kind of political understanding of what Barry Goldwater meant as opposed to Lyndon Johnson. I knew about Vietnam, for example, I was familiar with Dr. Tom Dooley, I knew that in Southeast Asia you had the classic struggle as we knew it between democracy and communism. As a Roman Catholic who prayed in grammar school for the conversion of Russia, I was very much interested in seeing that democracy. I remember having a discussion with my mother at the kitchen table when I was talking about being drafted. When you were drafted in 1966

in November you kind of knew that you were drafted because of the war and it was somewhat likely that you would end up in Vietnam. So I was discussing it with my mother and I thought it might be a good thing for me to do. I felt strongly that it was the right cause. I was quite young but I was moved by Kennedy and that New Frontier. I just thought it was an appropriate extension of our foreign policy.

INT: [Audio very weak.] How did you arrive in Vietnam, flew?

EA: Yes, we left Travis Air Force Base in Oakland and flew commercial, I think it was TWA (Trans World Airlines).

INT: [Audio very weak.] Did you go by yourself or with your unit?

EA: It was all a function of dates. A lot of guys that I was with at Fort Polk went over with me but there were other people as well.

INT: [Audio very weak.] Did you stay together when you got there or did you get dispersed?

EA: When we got to a place called 90th Replacement Battalion, this was step one of the DEROS (Date Eligible for Return from Overseas) system which was where people rotated back 365 days after their tour began. The 90th Replacement was where they backfilled those units when people were leaving to return to the States after their year of duty. Once you got to 90th Replacement Battalion, you would go wherever you were needed. So on the two days that I was there, I got orders for the 11th Armored Cavalry which I've since recognized as being a quite fortunate situation.

INT: [Audio very weak.] What do you mean by fortunate?

EA: I was 11B Light Weapons Infantryman and I ended up going to a Cavalry unit which meant I was going to be riding on ACAVs, Armored Cavalry Assault Vehicles, as opposed to humping the boonies on your feet. That in itself was quite fortunate.

INT: [Audio very weak. Asks if it made a difference with soldiers being replaced individually in Vietnam as opposed to WWII where units were replaced as a whole.]

EA: It made a tremendous difference, I think, in every aspect of the war and the aftermath. Obviously being there for one year and one year only meant that you were replacing your seasoned combat troops on a regular basis. By the time six, eight months rolled around, you were just beginning to feel somewhat comfortable. You were always rotating in a group of rookie or fresh recruits, FNGs (fucking new guys). [laughs] We know what that means. So on that level I think it had a very important effect. Also when you get to the issue of the plight of Vietnam veterans, you factor in the fact that veterans left after a year and on the 366th day they were back on their block in their

neighborhoods without any time to decompress, to discuss their experiences with their peers. You could get in a conversation with a stranger on the Freedom Bird on the way home but in all probability his experience wouldn't approximate yours either. The Vietnam War was really a function of not only of where you were, but when you were there. As you left, the person who replaced you, who stepped in to do your job, had a different experience because of the fact that it was a year later.

INT: [Audio very weak. Talks about soldier loneliness going over and coming back.] Somebody made a really valid point, here again, WWII soldiers coming back, because of the nature of transportation, had two weeks to come back, with guys they kind of knew. I don't know why the government, they should have known, they were not aware of what was going on?

EA: Here's why they did it and this is stuff that appears in the Pentagon Papers. It was determined that the least disruptive system for society, for the home front, is to take men out singly and individually, and replace them singly and individually. According to the think tank people, that would have the least disruptive effect on our American society at home. There was never a thought given as to what it would do to the fighting man, what he would do upon his return home. It was how can we minimize opposition to the war by keeping everyone at home relatively happy or at least relatively unhappy to a certain extent.

INT: Are you saying that the protests that were going on in the country helped make that decision?

EA: I think the decision to use the DEROS system probably predates most of the anti-war activity. I think they knew what they had, they didn't want a full-blown encounter in Vietnam. I think all the tentative steps they took to get to that level in 1968-69 of having over half a million troops there, I think they were feeling their way gradually. The prospects for opposition at home, they wanted to nip that in the bud. So they adopted these measures, one of which was the DEROS system.

INT: [Audio very weak. Talks about lack of government concern for veterans.] There's no debriefing or whatever you want to call it.

EA: No, that's true. I don't know if the government was concerned about that at all and I don't think too many vets were. When I came home I remember going to the bar I hung out in before I left. I walked in and somebody said how're you doing and asked what I'd been doing because I hadn't seen this guy for about a year or so. I said I had been in Vietnam and the guy said, "Oh. Well, did you see the game last night?" [laughs] There was no discussion at all about it and I didn't particularly want to talk about it either. Of course when other guys that I knew, who had been there, came back we would talk. To non-vets, I can live without discussing the war. I don't think that was noticed by our government, that there wasn't a good way to reintroduce the veterans to civilian life, I

don't think that was ever an issue. And as far as fighting the war with fresh recruits, keep in mind that the typical ground soldier, foot soldier in Vietnam was 19 years old as opposed to 26 in WWII. Nineteen year old kids can be pretty crazy, pretty brave, heroic. So I don't know if it had an adverse effect on the outcome of the war, using young replacements.

INT: [Audio very weak. Talks about how he coaches, the value of being part of a team, and how he believes that it would have been more productive to replace soldiers as a unit rather than individually.]

EA: If Vince Lombardi had run the war effort it would have been totally different.
[laughs]

INT: When you got to Vietnam where did you land? What was your first impression?

EA: Bien Hoa Airport. My first impression was that it was awfully hot and I remember being amazed that there were Vietnamese in conical hats and black pajamas right on the base. I'm saying to myself, I don't understand, who is the enemy? I thought the people in the conical hats and black pajamas were the enemy. As it turned out they were civilians, it was their country and they were all over the place. I was a little confused about all that.

INT: What basically did you do during your tour?

EA: As I said, I was fortunate to have been a Light Weapons Infantryman who went to an Armored Cavalry unit. Once I got to the 11th Armored Cav, I was fortunate again in that we presented ourselves, we went by truck from 90th Replacement Battalion, five-ton military cargo plane (sic), to Xuan Loc where the Cav had their base camp. When I got there, the First Sergeant in the Headquarters Troop read off a list of names, I was one of those names, and asked if we could drive a truck. My father's advice was never to volunteer but I knew that driving a truck was going to be better than anything else over there. I'd never driven a truck but I didn't let on. After my first month in country I was TDY (temporary duty), I'm not sure what it means but it means at a temporary duty station, in Cholon which is the Chinese ghetto district of Saigon. It's across the canal that runs through Saigon, it's like the twin city to Saigon. I was living with some 11th Cav people in an abandoned rice mill there, and there was a contingent of MPs (Military Police). I lived almost as a civilian for my first month. We would take a convoy from Cholon to Long Binh to Xuan Loc and go back the next day and we did that for a month. We spent the night in Cholon and in Xuan Loc base camp. I forgot to mention that the 11th Armored Cav was just in the process of setting up a base camp and that's why there was a need for that. Once I got back to my unit, the guys that I'd gone to the unit with had already been assigned to various troops, mostly First Squadron troops and I was sent to Headquarters. I retained my military occupation as 11B Light Weapons Infantry, I did a lot of different things, mostly driving convoys. 11th Cav, back at the time I was there and probably carried out through the war, used infantrymen for all their jobs. Everyone

was supposed to be able to pull any kind of duty whether it was night ambush patrol or perimeter guard or the more, shall we say, mundane jobs like KP (kitchen police/patrol) and barbecue.

INT: Could you fit your tour into the broader story, events that were going on?

EA: I didn't really have that perspective when I was there although I was there during the Tet Offensive and in fact, I had gone on R&R (rest and relaxation/recuperation) to Bangkok the week before the Tet Offensive began in the Tan Son Nhut area. I had just stepped off the plane at Camp Alpha at Tan Son Nhut Air Base when the Tet Offensive began. There were sappers in the wire, the compound was being mortared and rocketed and I remember they didn't have the steel pots and weapons for us. Tan Son Nhut Air Base was probably the most fortified and secure military area in Vietnam, at least from my point of view. I wasn't up north so I don't know how secure Danang was but this was the equivalent of Danang. The people that had the weapons and the steel pots were the permanent party down there who had non-combat occupations like cooks and clerks and stuff like that and they were the people that were out with the weapons and steel pots and I found that quite alarming. For two nights, well basically the first night, the second night was a little better because I found out afterwards that a couple of units, the 199th [Light Infantry Brigade] and 25th [Infantry] Division, were out there also. I finally got back to my unit during Tet and we ended up outside of Bien Hoa where we got hit pretty good. But by the time I got there, it was kind of the aftermath. I missed it while I was down at Camp Alpha.

INT: When you refer to Tet you're referring to 1968?

EA: Yes, January of '68, the turning point of the war for many people, Walter Cronkite notwithstanding. I was there for that and what I noticed was, from a personal point of view, things like leave. We could go into the city of Xuan Loc when we didn't have duty. We were in base camp and we pretty much were free as long as we didn't have a detail, you kept the weapons clean and the vehicles, you didn't have KP, barbecue, night ambush or perimeter, you could probably get permission to go into Xuan Loc. That changed. Before Tet if you went to Saigon, the place where I would be on convoys to Saigon, you had to wear civilian clothes, if you were a US military person. That changed. You could no longer wear civilian clothes, you had to wear your fatigues, you had to have unit patches, name tags, rank insignias. This all changed. Granted this is very superficial but it was obviously a command decision that filtered down and manifested itself in these kinds of more stringent measures regarding all free activity.

INT: The controversy surrounding Tet has always been did the American government know prior to Tet. You were there, did you have any awareness?

EA: No. It was a total and complete surprise. There were certain areas where you knew Charlie was and you deferred to him particularly at night. In my mind it was not

conceivable that he had could have gotten as close as he did to overrunning Saigon and to overrunning Tan Son Nhut. He didn't really get that close, we know that now but if it wasn't for a few key command decisions made in the eleventh hour to thwart them, it very well could have been. I didn't know it, I wasn't aware of it. Reading, and I forget the general's name, who prevailed—this is brought out by Neil Sheehan in his excellent history titled *A Bright Shining Lie*. I should know his name. It wasn't [General Frederick C.] Weyand, it was a three-star general, I could look it up but I don't have it on the tip of my tongue. He prevailed upon [General William] Westmoreland to send more troops, to get the 25th Division, the 199th Light Infantry Brigade up to Saigon, to that area, because Charlie was massing an attack. Westmoreland said no. This is when the discussion between the High Command was are the communists interested in Khe Sahn or is that a diversion. We know that Westmoreland thought the major attack was going to be on Khe Sahn. He thought that the North Vietnamese and their communist southern counterparts could cause another Dien Bien Phu and force us to ignominiously withdraw. That of course was wrong. Khe Sahn ended up being a diversion and the main attacks came—I mean if you were in Khe Sahn it was by no means a diversion, it was a very severe and prolonged siege but the North Vietnamese never intended to overrun Khe Sahn and that was Westmoreland's contention. Shortly before Tet began Westmoreland agreed to realign the troops into the Saigon area thereby saving Saigon. It was an eleventh hour decision by Westmoreland.

INT: You saw a definite difference before Tet and after Tet.

EA: Yes, in the way it affected me personally. There was also a sense and this would be in the area of troop morale, there was definitely a decline in morale after Tet. It kind of threw everyone for a loop. Charlie was beaten back and defeated all over, it took some time, more time, for example, in Hue, but he was defeated. The Vietnamese, the VC (Vietcong) and the NVA (North Vietnamese Army), suffered extensive casualties, much more than we did. Militarily it was probably a defeat for us but politically of course we know it wasn't. So for a kid, I turned twenty in Vietnam, I'm saying is this going to end? To me, in my ability to relate to it, it was kind of a spontaneous eruption by the Vietcong and if they could do it once, what would prevent them from doing it ad infinitum? Is there an end to this? How can you possibly prevent that kind of spontaneous uprising? So I think that it caused a lot of discussion among the troops and a corresponding diminishing of morale.

INT: When you say discussion among the troops, were you aware that after Tet probably marks the high point of American anti-war protesting with Chicago, etc. In Vietnam were soldiers aware of what was going on back home, how did you become aware of it?

EA: My parents sent me the Albany *Times-Union* every day. I'd usually get six on one day [laughs] so I read the Albany *Times-Union* while I was there. At the PX (Post Exchange) *Time Magazine*, *Newsweek*, all the leading periodicals were available on the stands.

INT: So the news was not censored?

EA: Oh no, not the least bit. In fact, even the Pacific *Stars & Stripes*, the military news magazine that came out once a week in Vietnam, even referred to it although it didn't give it as much weight. I remember reading *Time* magazine and *Newsweek* about a demonstration, I not sure where it was, in New York City in 1967 or '68.

INT: Spring, March of '68 after Tet.

EA: I returned from Vietnam in April '68 so I could have read about that one. So yes, I had heard of the anti-war movement.

INT: Did this have an effect, an influence on the soldiers in Vietnam?

EA: I don't know. Personally I was going through some changes myself. The more I thought about the war, things that were going on that I could see, I wasn't really convinced, I was doubting all those preconceived notions that I came with. Maybe some of the anti-war news kind of fed that, I'm not sure, kind of subconscious. I remember going through a lot of inner turmoil myself and then with some of my buddies over there, we would talk freely about anything. When we talked about what we were doing we kind of kissed it off as being our fate. Whatever was going to happen was going to happen. We didn't really think in terms of how we could get out of it or how we could prevent it or stop it or alter it or change it.

INT: I'm really surprised about your reading *Time* and *Newsweek*. In every war traditionally there always is a certain amount and sometimes outright censorship of the press.

EA: I don't know, that could have applied at the front, at the sites, there was no front. I'm not sure what actually got reported back. You talk to Wallace Terry, who I mentioned earlier, Wallace Terry was a *Time* correspondent. Wallace Terry can tell you many stories about how the military tried to edit and/or sway or influence what he was writing about. But the fact of the matter was whatever got back there *Time* magazine was being printed and was available at all PXs over there. There were periods of time when we couldn't get to a PX and you couldn't get mail from home and you didn't get your newspapers or whatever but when you got to the PX or you got back from the field, there you were.

INT: Should the government have censored?

EA: We know that Vietnam was the first television war, it was on everyone's 6:00 news when they sat down to dinner. I don't know if that was good or bad in terms of the outcome of the war. In retrospect for me, anything that facilitated the end of the war was good because I got to the point where I didn't think that we were there [breaks off] we

were there for the right reason, but the right reason was not reflected in our policy. The idea of democracy versus communism now in retrospect we can see these communist systems falling like a house of cards all over and if we had foresight then, we probably [breaks off] I mean who knows? If we had reestablished ties with Vietnam after our withdrawal, their system could be in the process of crumbling now which unfortunately it's not. The motives as espoused by Kennedy and Johnson were certainly noble but the reality of the matter is the South Vietnamese people did not feel it important enough to fight the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese. That's what it came down to and I think the fact that that government collapsed so soon after we left is testimony to that. They just didn't have the will to fight. I don't know if they believed in their system and in their leaders and that's the main problem. We ended up supporting the wrong leaders. We could have supported, there's an excellent book entitled *A Viet Cong Memoir* by Truong Nhu Tang. He tells about his experiences, he was the highest ranking member of the Provisional Revolutionary Government, he was the Minister of Justice, to defect. He did not like the way the communists were handling the country after the war, particularly the North Vietnamese. The Provisional Revolutionary Government, that political arm of the Vietcong, was made up of nationalists. These were people who did not particularly like them, they revered Ho Chi Minh as a national leader but were not enamored with the communist system and were not communists themselves. These are the people who got sold down the river after the Vietnamese took over the country, after the North Vietnamese came down. It was the non-communist people that fought and died as our enemies who suffered in the takeover of the NVA. If we had found those national leaders, and there were great ones, there were incredible people, businessmen who could have easily been won over to our side if we had courted them. Instead we ended up with leaders like [Ngo Dinh] Diem who was an arrogant, totally isolated individual, and [Nguyen Van] Thieu and [Nguyen Cao] Ky. These people did not have the respect of the people. Therefore, our involvement was doomed because in our absence those leaders were not able to rally the people.

INT: Did you have personal contact with the South Vietnamese people in your day to day? What was their reaction to Americans?

EA: They loved Americans, the Vietnamese people are wonderful people and they loved Americans. Of course they were making a living off the Americans and what we did to their economy was criminal. It wasn't any doing of our own; the whole military payment system got intermingled with the dong and the piaster system which was the basis of their economy and they had a multi-standard economic system. It got to the point where you could spend MPC (military payment certificate) in any Vietnamese establishment. We were told that when you went to a Vietnamese place or purchased anything from a Vietnamese you were supposed to change your MPC into piaster and spend that. It got to a point where the Vietnamese had a higher regard for the MPC than they did their own currency. There were also problems with the greenback black market. A lot of things were going on that had a negative impact on the Vietnamese economy. But getting back to the Vietnamese, they were a wonderful people, the people I knew and I didn't get to

know that many because we had just established our base camp when I got there and unlike some of the more secure areas, we didn't allow the Vietnamese to do any of the jobs on our base camp. Some of the base camps had Vietnamese KP, hooch mates and hooch girls that'd do the hooch, we didn't have any Vietnamese on the base at all. On convoy duty I would meet Vietnamese.

INT: So you didn't pick up any resentment towards Americans?

EA: Not at all, on the contrary.

INT: Tell me what Saigon was like.

EA: [laughs] Before Tet it was a really fun place. Even with the war going on it was a relatively beautiful city. It was built by the French, colonized the country in the 18th century so you get a lot of European and particularly French features—wide, tree-lined boulevards, very grand structures. The US Embassy was a beautiful building, beautiful cathedrals. It was a very lovely city with a thriving kind of war-time economy [laughs] drugs, prostitution, and other forms of black marketeering. It was exciting for a 19-year old kid. [laughs] I didn't get to spend a lot of time there [Saigon]. I was living in the Cholon area which is across the canal. That's kind of a Chinese ghetto. Where I was living on the canal, we had homeless orphans living outside. That's where I got to meet a lot of Vietnamese. I'd find a few kids that I would give food to every day. I remember this guy, Nguyen, who was five years old and was living alone in the street with his one-year old brother. They didn't have a home, they were two orphans, and this five-year old kid had assumed responsibility for his one-year old brother. I was totally moved by that. While I was there I fed them every day, gave them as much food, as much money, as much anything as I could. While I was there in Cholon I managed to get to Saigon maybe a few times. I was in Cholon for a month half time: I would spend one night at Cholon and one night at Xuan Loc. I was in Saigon a total or maybe six to eight times. Fond memories.

INT: [Audio very weak.] They did basically the same thing, brought kids food and built them playgrounds.

EA: Americans are wonderfully generous and big-hearted. That's not to minimize what happened at My Lai. The Vietnamese loved us. When we talk about My Lai and war time atrocities, we're talking about remote villages and strongly enemy held areas and that's a different situation. The cities were not at any time hostile to Americans, nor were the larger villages.

INT: When did you leave?

EA: April of '68. I was reassigned to Fort Hood, Texas. I was with the 11th Armored Cav and I was reassigned to the 1st Armored Division at Fort Hood. That ended up being

quite an experience. As I mentioned, I was going through this kind of transformation from someone who really supported the war when I got there, to someone who had misgivings about it half-way through, to someone who was opposed to the war when I left. When I got back to Fort Hood I was reassigned to 1st Armored Division and, as it turns out, they were doing something that the Army euphemistically referred to as [Operation] Garden Plot and what Garden Plot was, was riot control duty. It became known very early on, I'm down at Fort Hood, Texas during the late spring-summer of '68, it became increasingly clear that 1st Armored Division was going to Chicago for the Democratic convention. I had a very hard time with that and I told my platoon sergeant, Sergeant Norton, great guy, I said, "Sarge, I can't go to Chicago with a weapon. I'm back from Vietnam, there's no way that I can bring a loaded weapon into the streets of America, I'm just not going to do it." He said he respected that and that he would take care of it. So he arranged for me to stay behind. My whole unit went to Chicago and as it turned out, the military wasn't needed to maintain order there. First Division never got into the city of Chicago. I watched the Democratic Convention from Sergeant Norton's room in my barracks. He left me the key and I stayed in his room.

INT: Was there any reaction from the guys when they came back?

EA: Yes. Basically, I knew more about what happened in Chicago than they did because they never got into the city of Chicago, they were camped out some place in Illinois, outside the city, so basically I filled in most of the people about what happened. Of course it was mentioned in the newspapers soon afterwards, everyone was pretty amazed.

INT: When you came back were you actively opposing the war? Obviously, the Chicago situation took a little courage on your part.

EA: No. You know, it would have taken courage had my platoon sergeant said, you're going anyway, that would have required, I don't know what would have happened in that case. I felt strongly enough about it to bring it to his attention and tell him that I wasn't going. I don't know what would have happened if he hadn't reacted the way he did. Basically, I was thinking everything through. I'm twenty years old at this point, just trying to make sense of it all. After I was discharged that September and went to college, first at J.C. (junior college) and then at SUNY Albany and got to hear these radical student leaders, I certainly didn't place a whole lot of stock in the kind of truth that they were telling. I was a Vietnam vet who was opposed to the war but I thought of myself as someone who was a Vietnam vet first, who had some insight and experiences that could be useful. This was before I heard any of the leaders in the anti-war movement, and I can only think of a few of them off the top of my head, none of them had any understanding of what the GIs were going through. It wasn't until maybe 1969 or '70 when this whole idea of abusing GIs in the cities and the airports subsided. I never experienced that but I know people that said they did and I certainly believe them. I'm aware of people locally who called me a war criminal because I went to Vietnam and I fought that, I rejected that, and I told the guy so and I told him why it was so and I was pretty angry about it. That

was a thing that I also had to work through because I didn't feel a part of the anti-war movement because of that. And that was OK with me. I was doing what I could do to bring some sense into ending the war and basically it wasn't much, my efforts consisted of talking to as many people as possible and doing these kinds of interviews.

INT: [Asks about student groups and Vietnam vets.]

EA: I attended a meeting of Vietnam Veterans against War and Fascism which is a great title for an organization [laughs]. It was an offshoot of Youth against War and Fascism. I guess it was active on the SUNY Buffalo campus and a friend of mine was going to SUNY Buffalo. In fact, he was a cook at Camp Alpha when I landed during Tet Offensive who was out there, never fired a weapon since basic training, I don't know, maybe he had some heavy duty dinner rolls with him [laughs]. He also became an anti-war activist and was active in that group, Vietnam Veterans against War and Fascism, at SUNY Buffalo. At Albany it wasn't much of an organization. I went to one meeting and wasn't impressed with anything about it. I wasn't aware of Vietnam Vets against the War, they weren't active in Albany as far as I know, at least not on the SUNY campus. So I wasn't active in any Vietnam vet anti-war movement. I did know friends who came back and we'd discuss the war and all of my friends agreed to a man that it was a waste. We all had arrived at that from various angles. Basically the bottom line as far as we could see was that the killing, the destruction, was not worth it. It's kind of an in joke when Vietnam vets put down the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) but there's a certain real important truth in the performance of the ARVN that should be prominent in discussions about the justification of the war. We all know that if we were invaded by another outside force, say a communist conspiracy from Canada, we would assume the forefront of that fight. If our allies in France and England sent troops to help us, that would be fine. The ARVN were not willing to assume the role and therein I think lies the rub.

INT: [Asks about difference between vets and non-vets.]

EA: I think the guys that went to Vietnam were forced to mature and assemble these heady thoughts and to make sense out of a weird experience and the guys that stayed behind, and I don't begrudge this at all, they had their exams and homework to do. It did occur to me that Vietnam vets were a little more serious about things. But then again, when I got back I was only 20 years old and I felt cheated that I had gotten snatched up and sent away. I felt like I had some partying to do, some lost time to make up for and I ended up doing a lot of that for about five years. [laughs]

INT: When did you become active in the Vietnam vets movement?

EA: I remember hearing Bobby Muller on TV, I think it was on *The Donahue Show*, and I was intrigued by the idea of an organization of Vietnam veterans and I particularly liked the things he was talking about. I'm sure you recall Bobby Muller as a brash, radical guy

but basically what Bobby Muller was talking about in those days was a Vietnam veterans' agenda and the things we could do as veterans to help ourselves. I thought that was a very intriguing idea so I went to a meeting of VVA (Vietnam Veterans of America) Chapter 8 in Albany. At the time there was a lot of infighting going on regarding the direction of the organization. This resulted in the split between VVA and what is now known as the Tri-County Council. I was kind of an impartial observer of all that and I did not like the bickering that was going on so I decided that this was not the time for me to join as a formal member of an organization so I pulled back and thought things over. I maintained a membership both in VVA and in Tri-County after the split and stayed abreast in political developments among Vietnam vets. As we know, Jack McEneny who is commissioner of the Department of Human Resources from Corning, he had the veterans' internship program, that's how I was hired. That's probably one of the best things that's ever happened to me was landing a job with the city of Albany in 1974. My job at that time was doing some veterans employment counseling and recruitment for this Vietnam veterans' internship program. It was a great program and I had an opportunity to meet and talk to a lot of vets. I left the city in '83 and went to work as an analyst for the New York State Assembly Veterans Affairs Committee. That's where I got my first real strong induction into Vietnam vet affairs.

INT: [Asks about the shift in Vietnam vet stereotypes since the early '70s, the Vietnam veteran "myth."]

EA: Good question. I think it's a confluence of a lot of different things coming together with what was happening in the entertainment industry, some serious Vietnam war films like *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now* and *Platoon*, and [Stanley] Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* and some very highly critically acclaimed literature: Tim O'Brien's *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, *Going After Cacciato*, people like Larry Heinemann, Vietnam vet novelists who are winning the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. People are taking another look at who actually served and what was going on. I think it was a cultural point that brought us where we are. We had some very good outspoken leaders that were making sense. You know Vietnam vets never really got into the mainstream of the traditional organizations. We know that Sparky Riegel is the national commander of the American Legion and there are other Vietnam vets, the VFW national commander is also a Vietnam vet, a lawyer from Louisiana, Larry [breaks off] he visited the Memorial, can't think of his name. So we've had some good leaders and we've developed a pretty decent political agenda. I think our issues are real issues. We're not asking for bonuses. We're not asking for money. All we want is resolution to some very real problems: Agent Orange, PTSD (post-traumatic stress syndrome), those matters that prevented Vietnam vets from successfully readjusting. I think our issues are good and real and we've had some very good leaders. I think it was just a combination of time and good leaders and this cultural confluence that brought us to where we are today. I don't know how long it will last, so I think it's important that we get our work done.

INT: [Asks EA to elaborate on why Vietnam vets didn't join the traditional organizations.]

EA: Well, a lot of things. Foremost was that we came back without the big win, the big "w". We were perceived as losers although we know and historians know that even including Tet, we never lost on the battlefield. That certainly was enough but we were seen as not doing the job, I guess. It was a combination of Vietnam vets not being so inclined to join the organizations but also there was some resistance within the organizations themselves to Vietnam vets. There are a lot of little anecdotes I can tell you about that but that caused to further alienate Vietnam vets from the traditional organizations and from society. I guess it was seen that if the vet organizations didn't want us then [trails off]. But I don't mean to get off on that because the traditional vet organizations have certainly come around. The American Legion did a wonderful study on PTSD. There's been quite a change in that regard. The traditional organizations do support Vietnam vet issues. I would say that the Legion has more Vietnam vets than any other organization in the country. That's not to say the majority of Vietnam vets belong to organizations. There was a study done, I'm not sure who did it, I got this through the Division of Veterans Affairs. They use the number 18% for the total number of veterans who join organizations. So you've got 82% of all wartime vets that don't belong anywhere.

INT: [Asks EA to name the single biggest veteran issue as of August 1989 and in the future.]

EA: It's hard to answer and I'll tell you why. I would say that potentially the effects of Agent Orange can be the most devastating, it has that potential. We don't know how exposure to those dioxins will manifest themselves in the next 15 to 20 years. I think Vietnam vet health-related issues are the most important. Agent Orange has the potential to be the most devastating and pernicious effect of that war. At this point it's too soon to tell. That's certainly no relief to the family of Paul Bruderschaft [?] or the family of Ray Forgay [?] who have buried their children because of cancers like non-Hodgkin's lymphoma and soft tissue sarcoma. It hasn't really attacked us as invidiously as people were talking about ten years ago. So that still remains a big question. I would have to say in terms of every day issues, it's the whole cycle of veterans' readjustment. You were at the vet center, you saw what's going on there. The vet center, which was never in the Reagan administration's plans, was supposedly going to be phased out a number of different times. Fortunately, Congress has always acted to reauthorize it. They're doing a land office business today. Vietnam vets still suffer from a disproportionate amount of drug and alcohol abuse, a higher incidence of incarceration, and a higher incidence of knocking heads within the criminal justice system. Vietnam vets are still highly represented among the homeless populations in the cities. Those issues have a real immediate kind of need.

INT: [Asks about readjustment problems.]

EA: I think that for many of those people, it's the outward manifestation of post-traumatic stress disorder, combat has crippled them psychologically. In many cases it's just [breaks off] late in the war years, '69—'70, after Tet when morale started to decline, when the use of heroin was on the rise, when fragging became quite prevalent, people developed bad habits there. Not the least of which was just the basic [breaks off] I went through a period where I was kind of bothered by my prior experiences and did a lot of drinking. I realized that it was—I hope I can use this word on videotape—veterans, at least personally and I've talked to other veterans who shared this, in order to put up your defenses, you developed an I-don't-give-a-fuck attitude. It was hard to turn that off. In other words to do things in which your safety was in question without being totally terrified, you had to cast your fate to the wind. It was hard to turn that off when you came back. When do you start caring and how do you start caring again? I finally figured out that it wasn't right for me to not care about myself and the people that love me and the people I love. I don't mean to imply that I had anything nearly as serious as a lot of vets either in terms of my own experience or in my readjustment dilemma. But I think that's part of the outward manifestations to their traumatic occurrences and this kind of defense that they establish for themselves. It's not to say, if we have any psychiatrists or psychologists that are going to watch this, we know that a Vietnam vet's psychological development begin on the day he landed in Vietnam. Many people brought a whole trunkful of baggage with them.

INT: Last night I sensed a terrible sense of loneliness that those guys felt when they came back. Sal said to me, "You can understand but you'll never feel it or identify with it."

EA: I was very fortunate. I had a very strong support network in place. My family was there, a brother and two sisters, mother and father, a lot of aunts and uncles so I had a very strong support system in place when I came home. A lot of good friends who had still maintained weekly and sometimes more contact, still played a lot of sports, basketball, softball with friends who I went to high school with. I was lucky and I realize that and I'm eternally grateful for that.

INT: [Asks EA to talk about a program that he's putting together for October for teachers.]

EA: I'll give you an overview of the program. It's a program that the NY State Vietnam Memorial will be co-sponsoring with the State Ed Department, their bureau of curriculum development, the Capital District Teaching Center, the State Museum, and SUNY Albany. What we have in store in October on Saturday mornings from 10:00 until noon, is a 13-week program for credit—one credit for attendance and up to three credits for a paper—in concert with Dr. Richard Kendall, whatever you agree with him. The program will feature the Stanley Karnow series *Vietnam: a History* and the first hour of each of these thirteen two-hour sessions will be viewing the Karnow video and the second half will be discussing that material. The Vietnam Memorial will be assembling a panel of

veterans and where applicable will be assembling Vietnam veterans whose experience dovetails the material that was just viewed. We're very excited about it and we hope we get a good positive response. We went to the NY State Council on Social Studies annual convention at the Rye Hilton and we made a little presentation down there. I was surprised at the attendance at our workshop and also I was surprised at the stuff that was already being done. A lot of teachers that have recognized the importance of teaching the Vietnam War and have gone ahead and developed their own curriculum. I think that's wonderful.

INT: Since these tapes are going to be seen in the classrooms, are there any final thoughts for those 17 and 18-year old kids who might be watching?

EA: Definitely, number one: if you choose the military, and this is quite a change on my part too because for a while I was very anti-military, I now recognize that the military can be a viable career option particularly in peace time [breaks for tape change]. Pay attention to your political leaders. Probably at your age you won't really understand how important and how powerful these people are that we put into office and it's you who will make the decisions whether America fights another war. It's you who will make the decisions whether or not that war is a just war. Know what you're getting into and know your history and I hope that you've learned some things from this presentation.

INT: Thank you.