

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
THOMAS DEITS
Infantry, Army, Vietnam War
2004

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Deits, Thomas R. (b. 1946). Oral History Interview, 2004.

Approximate length: 1 hour 15 minutes

Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Abstract:

In this oral history interview, Thomas Deits discusses his Vietnam War service in the Army with Charlie Company, 2nd Battalion, 18th Infantry Regiment in Vietnam, attitudes toward the Vietnam War, his thoughts about returning home, and his post-war work with the Madison Vets Center. Deits was drafted into service in 1968 and talks about basic training at Fort Campbell (Kentucky), Advanced Individual Training at Fort Lewis (Washington), and his training at Infantry School in Di An (Vietnam). He discusses attitudes about the war at the time he was drafted and the attitudes of other soldiers during his service. He discusses some memorable moments from his time in Vietnam, and his return home. Finally he comments on his post-war work as a readjustment counseling therapist with the Madison Vets Center.

Biographical Sketch:

Deits (b.1946) served in Charlie Company, 2nd Infantry, 4th Platoon during the Vietnam War. He returned to the University of Wisconsin when he was discharged and then worked for the Madison Vets Center.

Interviewed by Jim Kurtz, 2004.

Transcribed by Casey Rogers, 2013.

Reviewed by Jennifer Kick, 2016.

Abstract by Jennifer Kick, 2016.

Interview Transcript:

- Kurtz: Today is November 23, 2004. My name is Jim Kurtz, and I am interviewing Tom Deits. Tom, when and where were you born?
- Deits: I was born September 2, 1946 in Petoskey, Michigan—of all places.
- Kurtz: Petoskey, Michigan. How do you spell that?
- Deits: P-E-T-O-S-K-E-Y.
- Kurtz: Michigan, okay, I just thought that'd be easier. Then ah, where did you grow up?
- Deits: Well, I was in, we were in Petoskey very shortly, and the reason we were there was my dad was a World War II veteran, my mother went home to where her family was to wait out the war, and I was born, my dad came home and then I was born, you know, shortly after--
- Kurtz: Okay.
- Deits: --he returned. And then, but my dad was, always was seventy percent disabled through fragments from an artillery shell, so he had to follow the track of VA hospitals. First one was in Chicago and next one was in Waukegan [IL], that area. Um, actually North Chicago, then the Milwaukee hospital area. So I grew up through sixth grade in Milwaukee, and then after sixth grade we moved north to Cedarburg community, about twenty miles north. And I went from there to University of Wisconsin, here.
- Kurtz: And did you graduate from Cedarburg High School?
- Deits: I did, although there's rumors I didn't [Kurtz laughs], but I did.
- Kurtz: What year did you graduate?
- Deits: I graduated in 1964.
- Kurtz: Cedarburg--okay, 1964--Ah, then what did you do after you graduated from high school?
- Deits: I came here, University of Wisconsin, and just, uh, followed the basic curriculum here, you know, went through, 'what are you gonna be when you grow up', ah, went through two years of that, and then I was gonna become a teacher, and then I was gonna become a lawyer, and then I

graduated in 1968 with a degree in psychology. Headed to law school, in fact I was enrolled in law school in 1968.

Kurtz: Okay, what happened then?

Deits: Well, that 1968 is a pivotal year in the history of the war and my personal history, they kinda collide, so it's about that time that uh --'bout '67 they increased the draft from 17,000 people per month to 35,000, so they basically doubled it. Which meant they had to get rid of deferments, which meant that law school--some graduate school including law school deferments were lost to those of us going on as of about June 1968. So I got drafted, in uh--July of 1968, received a draft notice.

Kurtz: Okay--my, see my thing is still a little screwed up here. What, uh, were any of your family or friends veterans?

Deits: Well, my dad was a World War II veteran, and, you know, he went ashore on D-Day, and so that became a highlight of growing up was my dad's experience around VA centers and other veterans. We moved to Cedarburg, our neighbor across the street had been on Iwo Jima, one of the, like, six or eight people of his Marine company that survived, and so those discussions were always there. My dad had two younger brothers, both were Korean War veterans, one in the Army and one in the Air Force. My dad's brother just below him is still alive and living in Foley, Alabama, became a Sergeant Major in the Air Force so we always had sort of a military flavor going through our house. My high school class, eleven guys went right out of high school into the military, I mean, I tracked them 'cause I was always close to my high school friends. None of those guys got killed in Vietnam, but my cousin, who was two years younger than me got, was a Marine, got killed February 4th, 1968. So, Vietnam was always, and the military was always, in the backdrop to my personal life and my family life. And my friends life.

Kurtz: So, big influence. Did you have any opinions about the Vietnam War, or the Cold War before you were drafted?

Deits: Well that's a terrific discussion piece, because when you come to a university like this, you know, you have your opinions from high school and they're really pretty secular as to who's playin' football, who's getting a letter, who's dating that girl, and what's going on, you know, in your little private lives. And then you come to the university and the whole world kind of expands into your lap, so to speak, and you look at a lot of different things. So one of the things in the 60's when I was here, you know, was the backdrop to who were we gonna be when we were adults and the war played a big part of that on this campus. There was a lot of information, education, look at that war, what it would mean

psychologically, personally, so--and most of the information coming to us 'cause we were eighteen, nineteen, twenty year olds, was that this war sucked, basically, this was not going to be a good experience. And the other part of that was, history meant that, I mean I went after the election. I went to Vietnam after the election of '68, so that by 1968 the country probably knew that we were going to pull out. And we were not going to fight to the finish. And so that colored the way everybody here looked at that war, its like you don't want to be an idiot and go there because we're just coming back, you're not gonna do anything, its just, its just the system not reacting in a timely manner, if that makes any sense.

Kurtz: Gotcha. Ah, I know you told me when you were drafted, but that's when I got my sequence here, so when were you drafted?

Deits: I got the letter July 1968. Summer I graduated, I think around June 6th, or something to that degree. And then, within about three weeks I had a draft notice.

Kurtz: Ah, where did you go for training then?

Deits: Fort Campbell, Kentucky for basic training, started that September 1968, there's a little bit of a lag period that, before you get in they actually make you report. So I think I reported September 5th or 6th maybe, and then I was there through that process. And then moved from basic training to Fort Lewis, Washington for Advanced Individual Training. Then the orders from there--and I just talked to somebody that was also on that base when I was there, Fort Lewis, and he confirmed that we trained in snow, slush, muck, and the rumor was that none of us that were training at that base for Advanced Individual Training would be sent to Vietnam 'cause we were just not acclimized,* acclimatized to hot weather, but—

Kurtz: Probably were wrong, huh?

Deits: We were wrong. He went and I went, so--

Kurtz: [Laughs] So, is there any reason why you didn't go to Tigerland , down there in Fort Polk? I mean obviously that's where they sent you, but I mean--

Deits: Well, I think there's, you know, there's two, there's two reasons. One is, one third of the military back in those days went on the route to Vietnam. So most of the people I was with ended up at Fort Polk, now the reason I didn't go there was because they sent, you know, from Advanced Individual Training, they sent units that were like thirty guys or twenty guys going there, I trained with a National Guard unit from New Hampshire. So there's only three of us going on from that unit, there's

three of us added on to that unit to fill it out 'cause they had a couple guys that were injured or hurt or something, so its like we were, we belonged and we trained with this New Hampshire unit, and then they went back to New Hampshire 'cause they were done. What did they do with us? Well somehow we just got orders for Fort Lewis, Washington. And, away we went. It just seemed like that's the way the military could do things.

Kurtz: Okay. So after you completed AIT, which was probably in the winter of '69, or something like that.

Deits: Uh, AIT I got done in January of '69, yeah.

Kurtz: What happened then?

Deits: Um--we got, you know, we were waiting for orders, and the day the orders came down, the units--everybody was saying "No, we're not goin' to Vietnam, you know, we're not goin' to Vietnam." There was orders for Korea. Well what they did was they alphabetized the orders. And those got A-E received orders for the Republic of Vietnam, F-Z received orders for—other places, Korea and Germany were the two that stood out in my mind. So my alphabetical name, "Deits," ended me up in Vietnam. Had orders to, I think I had a week in between completing AIT and getting and going to Vietnam, so I was in Seattle, Washington, my orders were to leave from SeaTac, so I had to fly back to Milwaukee or back here, I spent a week at home, flew back, and what stuck out in my mind was I always had to pay for that flight. 'Cause the orders were from the same place I was at, so, you know, it seemed like, "wow, even this doesn't work for me," but—

Kurtz: So that's interesting. So you had a week's leave. What was the reaction of your family and friends that you, oh and your reaction, when you knew you were going to Vietnam?

Deits: Um—you know, it's kind of strange cause there wasn't any great reaction, there wasn't any great farewell party, or 'this is a big deal,' or 'boy this is a bad break,' I mean it was all kind of, part of the process of 'this is the way things work,' this is, 'you gotta do your duty,' you're just gonna go. You know by that time two or three of my friends had returned wounded from Vietnam, one of 'em a Marine particularly badly wounded, and I'd had discussions with him about this, and what I learned from him was, is that it's not what you think it is. You know, going to Vietnam will not be the experience that you think it is. In fact, when he got injured he was a Corporal running his own patrol. So, and when they got wounded they were in the wrong place at the wrong time and they got hit by friendly fire, and it's, sort of his warning was, is the danger of this war is nobody knows what's happening right now. And that's even with me leaving, I mean,

nobody really knew what, what that would, you know, the election was just held, rumor was the war was over, you really won't have to go, but you had orders, so you just kept going, you know.

Kurtz: Did you have any reaction with college friends about, you know, going to Vietnam? Did anybody say anything to you that you went to college with, or—?

Deits: Ah, some of them guys, a couple of guys went to the Peace Corp, I mean, you know, we had discussions about that, and how are you gonna do this, and friends of mine were at University of Whitewater went into the National Guard and said six years to serve and they did that. In fact, I just talked to one of those guys yesterday, so there's all this discussion about what are you gonna do and not do, as to, you know,—was it a good thing or not good thing, so those debates went on till early in the morning, and they generally involved beer, scotch, and—you know, dead brain cells, but what they amounted to was they were all discussion, it takes a lot of real commitment to either not go, 'cause you had to change your whole life, or it takes a commitment to step forward, get on the plane, and just go. And that's what I did.

Kurtz: Okay. Where did you leave, and when did you leave for Vietnam?

Deits: I left from SeaTac Airport. I left, uh—end of February, I don't know exactly which date, and then there's a timeline over the International Dateline, and I arrived basically March 1st, 1969.

Kurtz: Where did you arrive?

Deits: Cam Ranh Bay.

Kurtz: And, how did you get, was it--did you go on civil transport or military?

Deits: Civil. Uncivil, civil, you know [Kurtz laughs].

Kurtz: Yeah, gotcha. When you got to Cam Ranh Bay, what happened?

Deits: Well that's a very interesting process also, just, just, you don't know, they don't tell you that what they're doing is they're, they're—you know, your name is in the whole list and the computer is picking you out and they're gonna pick out what unit you have to go to and what, basically you're gonna be a replacement for somebody who was just killed, wounded, or leaving, so you don't know all that, so what you do is the first night you get a bunk and a hooch over your head. They take that away the second night and you go to a landing strip basically, and you wait for your orders, and so then they're gonna transport you in-country, as soon as your orders

come. So I waited one day, one twenty-four hour period, a forty-eight hour period, and then I thought, “What the heck, they’ve lost me,” you know, “They don’t even know who I am,” ‘cause everybody I came in-country with on that plane, who you make a little bit of buddies with, had gone, it seemed like. So finally on the third day I get orders from the 1st Admin Division, so I think “Well, God, I’m in administration!” You know, they looked at my background and my records and I had some-- I actually could, I could type, you know, probably fifty words a minute with minimum errors, so I thought, “Wow, I’m in the 1stAdmin Company.” Well then they load you up and they fly you to, we went to Bien Hoa and then you go to the 90th Replacement Depot, and then you find out that everybody there’s got orders for the 1st Admin Company, I mean it’s just the general situation that you’re in. Then you’re in Infantry School at Di An. I think that was about a week, I can’t remember exactly, I think that was total about a week. So it’s about March 10th I finally got to my unit, which was—

Kurtz: What was, what was your view of the infantry school at Di An?

Deits: You know, I thought it was [laughs] I actually thought it was necessary to get you in tune to what was gonna happen next and give you some, just some basics to what to expect. I always thought that was a missing element is nobody really took the time, not necessarily what combat’s gonna be like but just, how do you best get through this experience? What do you concentrate and focus on? What language elements, you know, what little pieces of language can help you out here, if you’re gonna talk to Vietnamese? And some of that happened, uh, generally what you found out is, is it was people that were in infantry school who were leaving country or who had left from the field back to—and they were, they had their own agendas, you know, they weren’t really training us too much, they were there to get drunk and have a good time and whatever they were doing, they were safe at that point so, I don’t know that it was a very good training school, but it was probably a pretty good idea to have that process. I mean they did some phony-baloney things with us, woke us up at three in the morning and made us go out to the berm and you know, sit out there for three hours, as though the enemy was attacking, which of course they weren’t, and stuff like that. But, it was a pretty good lull, I mean again—

Kurtz: Yep. Okay, so after you completed that, where did you go?

Deits: So I was in Di An at that time, and then, you know, that’s the Admin, that’s the Admin area for the 1st Division, and then you have two other, I mean you have Lai Khe which is also--which is a combat area, so, 2nd of the 18th was actually Lai Khe, and so, they transported us up there by convoy, by truck. And there were four or five of us that went to, we spent

a night on the berm guard within the 1st Division Headquarters area. Then the next day we went up by truck. Then we went to a night defense perimeter called Fort Seminole, which is actually closer, it was back towards Saigon. Northwest of Saigon, Lai Khe is a little farther west. And then we joined the unit, I joined the Charlie Company, 2nd Infantry, 4th Platoon, which was the mortar unit.

Kurtz: Okay. What was your impressions in Vietnam, you'd been to Vietnam for about two weeks when you got transported up to Lai Khe, and probably was your first chance really to see some of the country when you were getting trucked up there, what were your impressions?

Deits: Well that's a very good question, 'cause it struck me, first of all that Di An was like business as normal, I mean, there wasn't too much there that you had to be afraid of, so one of the things you think about going to war is everything will be like a D-Day experience, everything will be an, you know, a combat experience and actually the war's pretty normal in Vietnam. What struck me was by the time I got there 'this is a pretty normal living arrangement for people,' in base camp areas like that. Lai Khe, on the way up there, what I remembered was there was a lot of areas that had concertina wire around them. And I couldn't tell whether the Vietnamese were fenced in or we were fenced out; there was this division, there's this, you could just feel it in the air, there's this, this sense of hostility, and not, and not maybe even hatred, just hostility that permeated everything you know. Like you could just tell that the Vietnamese that were working in the fields, or whatever they were doing, had no use for GIs in their midst. And it just seemed like a very strange place, Vietnam seemed very strained and very strange, and hostile, but not in a combat way, more in a—kind of a psychological, personal way. Oh, and people just don't want you here. You know, and so when you get to your unit, there are no Vietnamese in the unit, so it's just dealing with Americans, and you only have to deal with one side of the equation when you're there.

Kurtz: Okay, ah, how were you treated when you got to your unit?

Deits: Like an idiot. You know, like a—almost like you're a, you don't have an identity, I mean nobody really cares—like you're asking me these questions to set up a temperament of who I am, well nobody cared about that [laughs]. Nobody interviewed me to see who I was or what I could do, or what I couldn't do, it was all just, "You will fit in here, you will adjust to us, we will not ask you who you are or adjust to you," from the First Sergeant, who was the first person I guess we met, you know just, "Get your weapons, clean up, here's how this operates," you know, "chow at this time, and then we'll see you, and then you'll join your unit tonight, they'll be back in." But there was no-nothing personal, there's no sense of you being a person anymore.

Kurtz: How long did that attitude last?

Deits: Um—you know, it lasted a while because a) you don't have a, you're not really in the unit when you first get there, I mean they're gonna keep you outside of all things fundamentals of the units, they're just gonna let you walk along, basically [laughs], "You're just gonna fill a slot, but you're not gonna do anything." You know, you're just gonna try not to get hurt or not get somebody else hurt, and that's what they want you to do, so it takes about three weeks of observing, three weeks of carrying your weight, three weeks of uh, you know, or a month, about that, about three weeks and then they actually give you a job that, that's ah— has something to do with being a part of the unit. So I, I thought there was about a three to, three week outcasting before you got to—and actually I, you know, probably a little before that we'd had a couple small contacts early on, maybe the first—fifth or sixth day, and then one about—you know, I held up, I mean I didn't run and I didn't throw up and so, some of that—the war kind of breaks you in as well as the guys with you, and then—but one of the things you know is you carry your own fear load too, so—its, you gotta get your own comfort zone, even in that position.

Kurtz: How did you feel about your situation, and following up on the comfort zone thing, then, when you were out there walking around in the woods and stuff, how did you feel about that?

Deits: I—you know, it's—coming from Cedarburg High School to University of Wisconsin, the first day, you feel like you're over your head, but there's all kinds of backdrops you had to—that's, I mean there's all kinds of courses you can take and all kinds of grades you've already had, and all kinds of stuff you know about yourself as far as an academic person. As far as a combat person, you know it is a, very much, you can lose yourself very quickly, that this, "I can't do this." You know, I had those thoughts numerous times. And when you're the only guy awake at night and you've only been in-country probably ten—ten days, and you're the eyes and ears of the whole unit, or one other guy might be awake, on a night ambush and you're saying, "Woah, this is more than I ever bargained for in my life, this is a tremendous crushing responsibility." And you know, "I can't do it" was the first thing, but you just—it like you, you get to realize that your mind doesn't know what its doing either, 'cause you gotta just keep going. There's no way out.

Kurtz: Did uh, this attitude or feeling change during your tour?

Deits: Yeah, I think it changed fairly rapidly as, you know, I, probably about six weeks after I was there, Lieutenant pulled me over and says, "We're gonna train you to walk point now," you know, "you've got good

observation skills, you can read a map pretty well, so we need somebody, these guys are gonna be leaving shortly, they got about, you know, six weeks or something left, and you're one of the guys so, you know, walk point half time and I'll teach you." And, once you take--once they put you in the front of the pack, you know, your comfort has to be, immediately you gotta, you gotta fit in to that, I mean you get big, you get as big as the job in Vietnam.

Kurtz: Okay, ah, what were your duty assignments? I assume you were Eleven Bravo?

Deits: Right.

Kurtz: And was that what you had during your entire tour?

Deits: Right.

Kurtz: And, so you were in Charlie, were you in Charlie Company, 2nd of the 18th the entire time?

Deits: Correct.

Kurtz: And, did you receive any promotions?

Deits: Yeah I made it all the way to--the very strange diabolical thing is, is just before we left with the colors, I made it all the way to Staff Sergeant, E6. When I got back to the United States in Fort Riley, Kansas with the colors, they took away the E6 slot, I sent, they sent me to NCO school--ah you know, a refresher course at Fort Riley, Kansas and then they said "Well you can keep the E6, or we're gonna drop you back to E5." And I was just in an E6 slot coming back with the colors. But most of the time I was there I was a Spec 4 and a Sergeant, an E5.

Kurtz: What was a typical duty day like?

Deits: Well we, you know, we would go on basically seven to ten day operations, so we'd have orders for seven to ten days. And what we would do is, is we would patrol during the day, they'd give us typical good corners we might walk somewhere around six to seven miles depending on--and at night, and then we'd be looking for, you know sometimes it'd be the enemy, sometimes depending on where we were at. Sometimes it would be the enemy, sometimes it would be rice coming in to feed the enemy, sometimes it would be bunkers, sometimes it would be--just kind of depended. We were just more of a nuisance during the day, just trying to interdict them and figure out where they were headed and try to stop them from getting closer and closer to Saigon. So we were always off that Ho

Chi Minh Trail that came down through the Parrot's Beak, which is very close to Saigon. So we were always trying to figure out what the NVA was doing, what their plan was. 'Cause we knew by that time we were going to leave that area, and you know, we wanted to leave it as secure as we could, but at night we were on ambush duties all the time.

Kurtz: Did you have to go out on ambush every night, or—

Deits: Yeah when we were on the seven, seven to ten days—we were on ambush because we were not on a base camp area, I mean we didn't rotate it. We were out in the field.

Kurtz: So did you operate as a company or as a platoon, or—?

Deits: Well, we'd normally we tried to operate on a switch, we would operate with half, we'd split the platoon in half. So we'd have, we probably had, depending how many guys we had out, we'd have fourteen on one side, or, you know twelve or, depending on that. Ambushes we would set up usually four ambushes. So we were divided in half at night, which seems kind of screwy, I mean that's, we could have four, we have a cluster of four out there, sort of almost a circle—

Kurtz: With a donut hole in the middle and nothing there.

Deits: That's right. Right.

Kurtz: Okay. Ah, you said you were in a mortar platoon, did you carry the mortars?

Deits: We didn't. I was Bravo so that, so that the mortars were with us, which is a very strange concoction, meaning that, um, we generally had less infantry soldiers available than any other unit. So when we did things, is we'd have to borrow people, and when we were a part of it, we might be a part of, oh ah, the 3rd Platoon or something, we might be added on or they add on to us, cause we always had the mortars. And the mortars, if they could, which they put, there'd be a Headquarters Company somewhere or they'd be back and, we'd be too, depending how close we were to where, operating where the mortars were, very seldom did they come to the field with us. So one of the great gifts of being in our unit was, is if you watched your stuff, you could go from a Bravo to a Charlie. They would make you 'cause, they would, we had our own internal system, it's "Okay, you guys got only a couple of months left to go, you're gonna come back with the Charlies." You're still in combat situation but that was, that was sort of an incentive, if, you know, so if you—of course they took that away by the end of my tour, but—

Kurtz: They took the mortars away, or—?

Deits: The incentive, yeah, you couldn't do that anymore. We had new people come in, and that was an informal—

Kurtz: And by Charlie, that's a mortar man or artilleryman?

Deits: Yeah, Eleven Charlie is, is mortars, basically, yeah.

Kurtz: Um—okay, where am I at? When you went back to, at the end of these, ah, operations, what happened?

Deits: Well, it depends on if we made contact, or whatever we did. You know, the battalion commander, or whoever was always watching, you know, hanging over us or what are we doing, and who, did you blow the ambush, and so there's always this kind of, ah, small processing going on. Then we would go back and we would go to one of the base camp areas, or--and we had, eventually what we had was a, a fire support base right in the field. Had no, had no bricks or no mortars to it, I mean, no sandbags to it, it was just a spot in the woods. Um, outside Cu Chi. So we would go back there and then you, you'd get a day and a night and you could shower, and get clothes, and get mail and stuff like that. And we, so we would humanize as much as possible, in about a, oh, thirty six hour period, and then we'd get our new set of orders, and then we'd be going out somewhere else and doing something else.

Kurtz: Ah—I assume then it, when you went to these base areas, you really didn't get access to EM clubs or NCO clubs or anything like that.

Deits: Nope. No EM clubs, except uh, I mean Lai Khe had EM, had Bamboo Club, and, Di An of course had all kinds of stuff, and so I think three or four times maybe in our tour, we got to go back to Di An to. uh, there was a recreation area there, there was miniature golf and we got, we could do that, so every once in a while we'd get to some place where there was, entertainment, clubs, uh—swimming pool, Di An had a swimming pool, stuff like that.

Kurtz: Yep. Ah, did you have any combat, or memorable experiences that you could relate?

Deits: Uh—let's see. Yeah, I mean, there are numerous, but ah—let me—let me do, ah, I'll just do um—one that sticks out in my mind. We operate in many different ways, and we, we were kind of a unit that was always doing the odd stuff, so we would—I mean, I earned I think three Air Medals, meaning that I had at least seventy five insertions from the air, so we would do a lot of that. We were on the rivers quite a bit, on the Saigon

and the Dong Nai rivers, and we'd be doing patrol boats and going up and down the shoreline. So one night I mean, I remember this specifically, is that—this is a huge group of people 'cause I—we had—our company, and we had another company coming behind us. And we were going to seal off a leper colony building and area and grounds, because we knew that, that they were distinguished not a leper colony anymore but as either Viet Cong or NVA stronghold and they were, they were bringing in their wounded in there, and I mean there's intelligence that this is going on. But after midnight they dropped us off north of the place and we were gonna walk in about three miles and set up an ambush around it and see what happened. We thought they were moving about three in the morning, 'cause that's when they're typically moving their, [inaudible] intelligence. So we were the first company off the boats and I was the first guy walking, and there was a whole company, there was, you know, I was, we were with 4th Platoon, but every platoon was in order, reverse order behind us. And then there was another company behind them.

Kurtz: What was the field strength of these companies, typically?

Deits: About one hundred.

[break in recording] [00:29:58]

Kurtz: When the tape stopped, Tom, you were talking about getting off the boats.

Deits: Yeah, and we'd been on these boats for quite a while, so I mean we were, most of us were under the deck, under the deck area, so we were in hammocks, and we were swingin' around, and we were mostly seasick.

Kurtz: What kind of boats were they?

Deits: These, these were ah—oh about thirty foot, like, trawlers almost. These were, these were, actually they were, um—

Kurtz: Like World War II landing craft?

Deits: Yeah, something like that. I mean they could house a lot, but there was four or five of them involved, and they were, we were going up and down the river with lights shining and I mean I, you know, that was a different mission. And that was sort of, to throw everybody off of what we were doing. So then, then they unloaded us. And then we walked towards the leper colony, and so it was a, it was pitch black, gravel road, a hundred guys, or two hundred guys. You know, and as we're walking, we're walking, you know you're walking towards the enemy, and you just know that. So the good news and bad news is—a) eventually this is, we're gonna hit the destination. And as I'm walking, I'm looking, you know, my eyes

are adjusting, and this is probably a mile, mile and a half into this walk, probably about halfway there, and crunching on the road and I would stop us every once in a while 'cause we were pretty loud, once you get that whole thing moving. So I'd actually stop us to be quiet for a while so that ah, we could listen. I could hear sound coming at us. So I alerted the Lieutenant, we dropped off to the side, immediately. I don't know how they got the message back, 'cause in the military it's a real hard thing is how do you coordinate a message to another unit and what does it mean, so apparently they went up to the high ground. So we were in this low, sandy, kind of high grass but, but very loose soil, very—like a beach almost. Like sand dune-y area. And they're in rocks above us. And supposedly they were quite a distance behind us. And just as I got set up, you know I'm the first guy down, here comes, you can just count 'em, you can just see their silhouettes – one, two, three, you can count 'em, four, five, six, seven, they're coming up towards me and now the question is when do we fire, who's gonna fire first, who's in control of this operation, we had a Lieutenant with us. He's waiting, he's waiting, I'm, I'm counting 'em going by, counting 'em going by, I'm up to forty. I'm counting, there's about forty. And I can hear some, I hear voices, I see some mortar—bases going by, people carrying all, I mean so there, this is a fully loaded group of people going somewhere, I mean these are, um—this is an NVA unit. Don't know what size exactly. And then all of a sudden, the firing breaks out. I mean somebody—doesn't wait. And—the enemy just scatters they're just, they're just like deer in the night. Now everybody's firing, we're firing, we're watching the tracers go, we get two guys hit way down at the other—

Kurtz: What color were the tracers? Did you—

Deits: Um... we have, had red tracers coming, you know. So, and then we had, there were green tracers.

Kurtz: And the green would be VC—ah, the NVA.

Deits: Yeah. So, but the tracers I was watching were, red tracers coming, and they hit two of our guys at the far end. Not where I was at 'cause they couldn't reach me, I was way down at the other end. We don't know who we hit, you know, that was a, but it was a ten minute explosion in the night. Flares and this and that, and everything going on, and two guys hit down here, and now we gotta call for a medic. They Medevac two guys off, and who's in charge of this whole operation? You know, and I got two huge units out there. And the next thing that happens is ah, there's a wall. And one of the guys that's really close to me, who I knew very well, he decides he's gotta have a cigarette. Gets his poncho out, puts it over it, but he strikes the match or I mean the lighter or whatever he had, I can't, I don't know exactly, and it's like a flare. I mean, he did not have it

covered, everybody saw it, and then all of a sudden we got thump guns, thump, thump, thump, thump, like we got about, you know, four, five, six rounds just blasting us, and it turned out it was our other unit, 'cause—

Kurtz: That's int—was anybody wounded?

Deits: Yeah. That guy was, that guy was wounded, I got, I was wounded along the right, ah, thigh, it was just shrapnel coming in, no big deal I mean, 'cause you, but – they're walking 'em right down the line on us. And so now you gotta have this communication again. And what they had done in the meantime was they had called in gunships. So now the gunships are coming in, Cobras are coming in, the Medevacs coming in, we've just gotten, this guy's just gotten wounded, guy who was under the poncho, um—we're in this mass of confusion now, as to, where's the Medevac gonna come, you know, where is this gonna land? And they're not comin' in until the Cobra works out, so the Cobra's gotta work out first. I mean it was, and as we're sitting there listening to it, you know the radio's not too far away, I'm listening to it, and Sergeant—I say to another Sergeant, I say "Look, they're talking about us, they're not talking about NVA, they're long gone. They're not anywhere near where we're at. That's us!" So we, we came within probably about two minutes of having the Cobra work out on us 'cause the other unit thought that they were still firing against the NVA, they didn't have any clue, they thought we were completely down the other way from them so—I mean, and that's how, just a matter of inches everywhere, things seem to—and a cigarette can get you killed and uh—

Kurtz: Did you have any other memorable experiences other than stuff like that? Uh, you know like, did you see an elephant or a tiger running in the woods or—

Deits: Ah, deer. These deer, I mean we saw a little bit of, we saw deer, we saw snakes, I had ah—you know we used to—

Kurtz: Did you have any contact with bamboo vipers?

Deits: Uh yeah. Cobras, bamboo vipers, um, some kind of water moccasin snake, or water snakes were—one day we were looking for ah—they were using these dugout canoes to haul rice, at least that was our intelligence. So we had to look under the banks of these tributaries to the Dong Nai river, so we were in the water most of the day or we were probing with bamboo rods and, you know, looking for their equipment. I hit a nest of snakes that came out right between my legs you know and I thought—

Kurtz: Oh boy.

Deits: “This is it” [laughs]. You know if I scare them, I mean they scared me half to death, I’m not gonna shoot ‘em cause, actually my M16 was above the waterline and they were right here, but they came right—and they were these big, you know. And then you find out that you’re afraid of, you’re afraid of everything that moves in the dark, but ah—so yeah it was, it was, you never knew what around the next corner, that was, that was a problem. No elephants, um—a lot of water buffalos, um—saw Miss America, you know, that kind of thing.

Kurtz: Was that at a Bob Hope show or---

Deits: No she was on tour, I mean I did see a Bob Hope show, I saw one in Lai Khe and I’m thinking it was December ’69. Wasn’t supposed to go, our unit was quarantined to stay and provide support, security, and I happened to have a tower, which was, at Thunder Three, which is about thirty miles north of Lai Khe. A very bad, very hostile area, I mean lots of, always, every night there’s something going on, so—but I convinced one of the other guys that we had that tower—that was the security we had to pull, and I convinced one of the guys that only one of us had to do it for that eight hour daytime shift, and the other, we drew cards – high cards. So I got the second highest card, another guy got a high card, we hitchhiked to the main road—hitchhiked to Lai Khe, we hitchhiked to the main road on tanks, hitchhiked to, to Lai Khe on a jeep, and we got down there and we watched it from, you know, two thousand people in front of us, or five thousand, how many were there. Just barely saw it, and now we have to get back – how do you get back? It’s getting towards dusk, everybody else is, in Vietnam has got a ride. We don’t have a ride, we don’t, you know, we have to get back to our duty, which is this, this gun tower in Thunder Three, so—interesting process of hitchhiking back to the, to the staging area to get back, ‘cause it was about a ten mile ride from the road to Thunder Three. Convoy, you had this convoy trail, you had to go in by convoy, it’s the only way in—very strange, how we did that. But it worked.

Kurtz: It worked, and, so it worked out ok, huh?

Deits: Yeah.

Kurtz: Did you have any contact with civilians, when you were there?

Deits: Um—yeah, in our area, you know, which is the Three Corps, its very populated in some ways, and uh, you know uh, they would—we wouldn’t go more than a week or so without being in some village, and then, towards the end of our tour, we would do—instead of doing sweeps during the day, which, well—it, it depended on what were working at. If we were on our seven to ten day operations, we were still sweeping, we were still

doing ambushes. If we weren't doing that, we were going into some villages with, and we were providing security to dentists, like Cap Teams that the Marines had, and we were trying pacify the villages with candy, cigarettes, dental hygiene, um, and other stuff, so we'd be going into the villages for two, three, four hours a day. And then we'd have lots of contact with kids, and villagers, and mama-sans, and generally—

Kurtz: Any men in these villages?

Deits: No. No, they were all women run and all kid dominated, and they were all about trying to get something from us, it became a big hassle after just a few trips in because, they're begging constantly.

Kurtz: Did you, have any level of trust with these civilians, or how'd you feel about 'em?

Deits: Uh—you know you had the level of trust of this, is that, there was this sense of if you're in there doing a peaceful thing for them, they're gonna take, they're gonna take the product you're bringing in, the medicine, the dental hygiene, the, the cigarettes, and that to them was, in these areas it was more important than killing us. So, their first priority always had to, I had that trust, that "Gee they're gonna let us come in. And they're gonna let us walk out, cause this is good for their, their basic, economy. I mean this is a, when we came in, we always produced something for them, gave them something. But its not the kind of trust where you'd, where you'd wanna, you know, eat the meal they cooked for you or—it was just a sense of safety that you had with them, but it wasn't a trust of, of humanity, it was more of just a "Ok, they'll allow this to happen because they're gonna get more out of it." And they were always measuring that in my experience. I mean, I don't think we had a very good idea, on a large level, how the Vietnamese at every level understood a way to make this experience in, to their benefit.

Kurtz: Did you have any contact with the enemy?

Deits: Um—

Kurtz: I mean personal con—like prisoners, or—

Deits: Sure. Yeah we, there were, there were numerous times we took prisoners and uh, you know, you didn't have much contact with them. I mean you, the more had contact with their dead bodies—ah, but we did have—

Kurtz: Did you form any opinion about them based on the limited contact you had?

Deits: You know we, they tried to have you not form any opinions about, um—the hierarchy of, of—you know, and it was real—it was real interesting, ‘cause a soldier is a soldier and that’s all you knew about him. Yeah, I didn’t humanize them in any way, sometimes we’d find letters in bunkers, and we’d find other stuff that would be, we’d try to, would be a humanizing tool, but basically when you saw them they were like dead deer. You know, that’s the way you thought of them.

Kurtz: Um—did you have any contact with the ARVN?

Deits: Yeah, we trained, you know ARVN units came in behind us, so eventually we, for about three weeks we trained one right next to them, and, we, this was at Fire Support Base Seminole. We gave them that fire support base which we built up and secured and then we gave it to them, and we did all the tarps on it, on ah, the roofs, and ah, you know, and so—it was a very strange thing because we did all this work for them, they seemed never to appreciate it. Then we trained them; we were in the river swimming one day, and we’d go out and do our normal sweeps, do these things and they would, they would only work like half a day, that was one of our opinions that they would, they were really not into this. They were not gonna do this. But we got into a, into a swimming—next to them in the river, cause it was very, very hot. And it came out a mud fight start, people started throwing mud balls at each other. And literally, it, we locked and loaded and they locked and loaded. So we came very close to just killing each other right there, and it got out of hand very quickly, ‘cause most soldiers I was with could not tolerate Vietnamese at all, at any level.

Kurtz: So it didn’t make any difference what team they were on?

Deits: No.

Kurtz: Did you have any good luck charms or superstitions while you were there?

Deits: I had a peace sign, symbol, big one, I have it still, that my sister sent me from Old Town Chicago. I actually had to get two ‘cause I left one behind, somewhere, and I never found it, so she sent me a second one, I had that. Um—what else, I had cross, I had rosary—

Kurtz: Ok—uh—you said you were wounded, was the one time that you got shrapnel on that operation you described the one wound you had, or do you have any—

Deits: I have a, actually I have, I have a Purple Heart with a cluster, so I have two, two that the Army acknowledges, and there’s another one where I probably could have gotten one, just didn’t turn it in or report it. The one that’s more significant is, is we sealed off a village, this is September,

probably around the 17th, uh 1969. And we sealed off this village in another major operation and this involved probably two thousand soldiers. And we, we crossed the Saigon river to get to this village, and we got there, like at four in the morning. And we were, spent about seven or eight days there. And then, when, and they let us stay there. And it was, you know we killed like thirty or thirty five NVA and VC and—

Kurtz: Remember the village name?

Deits: Yeah [Phu wa Dong].

Kurtz: Okay.

Deits: And it became a big social, military event, 'cause after the first night and the second night, then we swept the village and we, we took a couple casualties the next day on booby traps that they set up, but then they let us sit there. But when we walked out, they booby trapped everything behind us. I mean when we walked out, it was one constant day of looking for booby traps. So, they let us sit around in that village for a week and put in tower, and do, give away pigs to the villagers, and then they ambushed us and, and booby trapped us on the way out. So the first day as we're walking out, and we'd gotten, fairly, you know, this wasn't too bad a duty, sitting around this village for a while, for a week. It was very hot, very, very muggy, and I walked point in the morning 'till noon, and then another guy took over cause it was this hard duty, and just as he's walking away from lunch break, and he's, he's up ahead, he's, he wants to get goin', you know he's, he didn't like, he's a guy that didn't like sittin' around. So he's moving out and I'm puttin' on my gear cause I'm gonna walk slack, I'm gonna walk second to him, even though we, we generally did not walk points with second or slack for each other, but that day I was doing it. He walked, oh I don't know, twenty yards ahead of me, hit a booby trap. He was smart enough, and he had momentum, this is the other part – he was moving already, so when he did it, he knew, he knew that he had strafed this wire, and he pulled it, and I was just getting all my gear together and taking about my first step and it's just like right after lunch. And he yells to me "Oi!" And I knew what that, you know, he's not yelling "Have a good day," or "Get you're—" you know, he's yelling to warn me of something, so—I, I was twenty—maybe twenty, thirty feet behind him, and just off on a strange angle, but—and the other people were just, were still down low. I mean, they were, we were just, just starting to get up. So it's just strange that he hit the booby trap right there. And in that process, I mean, I was the guy who was next in line to the booby trap and the shrap—and the, and the, and thought "Oh Christ, this is it, I'm dead," cause I don't have any momentum, I can't—

Kurtz: Yeah.

Deits: I can't go anywhere, I'm just gonna stand there and take it, whatever it is. And it just went [makes explosion noise], you know its just, everything popped, and I got hit with about twenty, twenty five pieces of shrapnel, all the way from my right eye here, it got right under my, just under my steel pot just right there, to one in the, one under the throat, and then most of them in the legs.

Kurtz: So, how did, I assume you got Medevaced with that.

Deits: Yeah.

Kurtz: So what was that experience like?

Deits: Ah, well you know it—it's a very strange thing 'cause—the whole war stops for you, its embarrassing. You know how hard, how hurt are you, you don't know, you don't know, there's nothing that seems like you're gonna die, but I also got hit in the lower genitalia, and that really hurt. There are areas of my body I never thought could hurt like this, like getting kicked right square in the nuts. So I, I'm really hurting but I'm also embarrassed that the whole unit has to stop and I don't know what's, you know, and you don't know what's the next step, and you don't know what's right and—but I could, I was mobile. I was—

Kurtz: Mhmm.

Deits: You know, so—it was a, it was a very embarrassing, as best I can say, it's like being in a traffic accident. "Oh God, I gotta show my license, and I gotta explain this," and it's sort of that way. And then the helicopter gets ya in and out of there, I mean—

Kurtz: Ok, so then you went to, how long were you in, in the, were you being treated for this wound?

Deits: Um—I got back in the field about ten days. So I, first three days I was at a field hospital, and then that was more for infection, they were worried about that. They had to take one piece of shrapnel out from just below my kneecap, right here, um—I had to get Tetanus shots, again, they gave me more shots. And some of the shots made me sick, I mean actually I, you know, and then they put me in kind of a profile, and they sent me back to the base camp, where I could actually pull guard duty or whatever, so—and then—

Kurtz: So what kind of evaluation did you have to pass in order to be sent back to the field?

Deits: Breathing.

Kurtz: Breathing? [Both laugh]

Deits: Or, you know, and again, you know this is the strange part, 'cause if you were slick enough you could, I could have probably stayed in the rear somehow, it was just a matter of convincing somebody that would be able to write up, you know, "This guy can't return to the field, he's got—" you know. "He's got—uh" At that point I probably had ring worm, jungle rot, you know, which are much worse conditions than the actual wounds, you know.

Kurtz: How long, did you have to go before you, uh, were DEROSed when you got this wound?

Deits: That happened in September and, uh, I had to get through April the next year.

Kurtz: Pretty early.

Deits: So, yeah.

Kurtz: Ok. Uh, now we're gonna talk a little bit about your assessment of the experience. What, what were your impressions of the country, terrain, vegetation, climate, and all?

Deits: Um, first of all, you know, most of Vietnam I saw, it was a very small, little area of it. And, and I saw most of it on foot. So, its not a good way to see a country unless you're like mountain climbing, I mean if you're walking around through the jungle, in the, in the slop and the—so, my first impression of it, of it was is "This is a lot of work. This whole country is just, no one in America understands how much work this is to do this this way. I thought the climate um—was very hot. I mean I'm more of a cool weather person and this is really, extremely hot. This is just unbearable some days, some nights. No breeze at night, thought the mosquitoes were just, and leeches were just, just made the experience horrific, I mean you got used to it. But—the shock and the adjustment for the first six, seven, eight weeks was just, "Oh my God, who, who, who can do this?" And then you see everybody doin' it, and you say "Well, you gotta do it." So—

Kurtz: Did you have any opinion about smell?

Deits: Well, yeah, I mean, it smelled like a restaurant, and it smelled like the—it actually smelled like KP, and the back area of KP where the food gets thrown out for whatever reason. Of course, there's very little refrigeration, so there's, there's a lot of things I think that are just fermenting, and, and

has a, has like a boiled cabbage smell to me, I mean, it was a, it was a very strange, odiferous smell. Though the woods were, I mean the woods, the, the jungle had a, it was kind of clean smelling and there was a different parameter of that. But any where or time you were around a human being, it smelled.

Kurtz: Ok. What was your impression of the food and your general supply situation?

Deits: Ah—I uh, you know I, I ah, question from a kid who asked me early on, “What do ya, what’d you eat there?” And I’d always thought that one of the problems was this food didn’t taste very good. I mean, you know, you didn’t get very good, you didn’t look forward to food on a daily basis. You looked forward to water. And that even had a plastic taste ‘cause it came, you drank it out of canteens, it was warm most of the time. So one of the pleasures of life of food, you really lost, you really lost the sense of—the only thing we ever fought over was uh—the vege—or the fruits, in the cans, in the C-Rats, we were mainly on C-Rats, at the end of the tour we were on some uh, MREs but mainly we carried our food, you know we lugged it around, and if you could get peaches or pears, that was a great luxury.

Kurtz: How were they divvied up, by seniority or—?

Deits: Well very interesting question! And the way they would do it is they, they have a Chinook drop them off at some convenient location and we probably wouldn’t even be there, so they put them on a helicopter and kick ‘em off on a mission over us, and then you go out and get them, and by the time— and they put ‘em in a, central location somewhere, but sometimes you couldn’t do that, you just had to give them to people. But most of the time what you’d figure out is that, anybody that could get there first would take the best things. And then so there was, there was a primary responsibility for an NCO to make sure the food got divvied up correctly, that the same guys didn’t always get the best deal. And you’d find people that would, that would expect always they would get the best deal.

Kurtz: What about your other supplies like uniforms and stuff like that? Was—

Deits: Terrible. I mean we’d go ten days in the same clothes. We would, we didn’t wear underwear ‘cause it chafed too much, so that, that, that was at least one thing, but—uh clean clothes made a big difference. And some days we just didn’t get it. We didn’t, I mean some weeks, I mean we just did not get clothes. It had two sets when you went out, and you never got, you know those were the sets you brought, you came back in so...so, our body odor and our smell was just horrible too, a lot of times.

Kurtz: What was your impression of the weapons that you used?

Deits: First weapon I had that did not work, and nobody told me that you don't put, originally they didn't tell me you didn't, you didn't fill the last, uh, slot in the cartridge. You didn't put the twentieth round in, you just fire with nineteen, 'cause the twentieth caused jamming all the time. So I would say that keeping your weapon clean and being able to have a weapon that fired was—uh—sometimes a luxury. You know what I did love was the machine gun, fired almost con—, I mean, that was, the machine gunners were really good at keeping them clean and they fired all the time, but I would say the M16s, if you got seventy percent of the firing in any firefight you were doing pretty good. And not that people didn't care, it's just that with the—you know, we would just have to throw away bullets 'cause they would just get gangrene, you they would uh, they would oxidize. And you never knew, I mean you know, you never knew exactly what the problem was. Was it the weapon? Was it the bullets? Was it the, I mean was it the rounds? Was it the guy cleaning the weapon? I wasn't impressed with the M16 when we originally got 'em, we got second level, brand newer ones, halfway through the tour, which were much better, mechanically.

Kurtz: What was your impression of the leaders?

Deits: Ah—You know the, the leaders, unfortunately, you know, you have, the leaders in a unit should be Lieutenants, should be officers and—a great many times, there weren't any Lieutenants out there with us. Most of the, probably half my tour, the highest ranking person was an E6. So it seemed to me that one of the things that happened was the leaders found a way to get out of there too. I mean they, they were like the rest of us, saying “God, this war is just useless,” you know, “why lose your life over here for this?” Um—its hard to—it was, it was hard, you know I had like, probably five Lieutenants when I was there that came in and came out very quickly.

Kurtz: Were they wounded, or were they just put in other slots, or—?

Deits: First one got promoted, he became the, General Wolfe's aide-de-camp or, you know, he, he put in for a slot, and he was a very, he was the best Lieutenant we had, of all, all the ones was the first guy, but he was looking to be a, so he got a Captain's promotion out of that, and he, one of the Purple Hearts he pinned on me, he and I got along very well. And then the next guy was a Lieutenant Holland came in, and all of a sudden he was back as an executive officer, he was gone 'cause he was pretty heavy and he couldn't really handle the physical, he couldn't adapt, so rather than, they moved him out. The third guy said, always claimed that he was the youngest Lieutenant in Vietnam, he said he was no more than I think

nineteen or twenty and blah blah blah, and he was the scariest cause he was blowing ambushes, every night on something, which is generally not a good thing to do. He lasted about six weeks in, and he—decided to fire some, a mortar round just to have the experience when we were in a base camp and he did not, he stood too close to tube and he didn't, didn't cover his ears, and he punctured an eardrum. So—his stupidity got him out of the field, and then he was replaced by another guy, and then, you know. Finally, there was just a whole litany of Lieutenants in and out.

Kurtz: How about the Company Commanders?

Deits: Uh, first Company Commander didn't make Major, he got relieved of duty, I mean its all, you almost got the feeling the First Division wasn't a place where they put their best—the best and their brightest, for whatever reason. No offense Jim, I know you [both laugh].

Kurtz: I understand. For the record I was in the First Division, if anybody ever listens to this tape.

Deits: So I mean it was just a very interesting phenomenon, I don't know how the rest of the army worked, but uh, ah—yeah so our first guy didn't make major, he was relieved, and the second guy came in. He was wounded, he left, uh—third guy was a guy named Captain Dick. D-I-C-K. And, exactly what he was.

Kurtz: With this, I'm gonna stop the t—

[break in recording][00:59:11]

Kurtz: Now beginning side one of tape two, uh, we were talking about officers, is there any officers you want to talk about, like Generals or anything like that, or, any, Battalion Commanders or anything like that, that you experienced?

Deits: Well I just uh, I don't even know the Battalion Commander's name, you know, we had one that would fly by in a Loach all the time and uh, he came down to, to root on, actually an E6 that was a, had his last days in the, this was when I was first got there, had his last days in the field, so he set up a daytime ambush, I think we were supposed— maybe we were supposed to be sweeping and we, he actually was taking too long a break, or something. The Battalion Commander came down, screamed and yelled, and uh, don't even know his name. Got back in the, in his Loach to take off, got out of the tree line and got shot down. So, you know, some of his attitude got him, I mean he got killed. Um, and we couldn't get to him, 'cause how a helicopter takes off it has to have—

Kurtz: Yep.

Deits: --That upward lift, and it bobs a little, and it just sits there for a while until it gets power. They sure shot, sure as hell shot him right out of the sky, with an RPG round, so that's how close he was to the—

Kurtz: Wow. Ah, was the mission explained to you, uh, when you got there, or any other time?

Deits: Well, I think the, the, they should have explained in a, every day or something. I mean, what happens is who explains it to you the first time then becomes a rumor every time after that. It's never really clear who—you know, so—so the, the—the big picture was never, was clear that we were gonna leave the country, and we were gonna lose the war, that was, that was clearly a political decision, that was not, we were not going to change the outcome of that. The mission then for the—for us was that three-fold thing, is try to win over as many villagers as we could while we were there, which is a strange part of our mission 'cause on the other hand, most of the time we were out trying to kill the NVA. We understood that part. We understood that the—we weren't gonna make a big dent in what the NVA was like, or did down there, but every, every battle that we were in was sort of like a football game or was us against them, so we, we knew it at that level, we knew that at our level it was that the NVA was gonna kill us whenever they can, or the Viet Cong, and we have to kill them whenever we can. That didn't have to be said ever again.

Kurtz: Ok, uh, do you feel that your training was adequate? For what you were put through?

Deits: I, you know I—I think that uh—where the training breaks down is, is you do it all by yourself, and there's no carryover, like I trained with the New Hampshire unit, so with those guys goin' home, if they would have gone over as a unit, you would have had the, the guy who was the Platoon Guard leader, and you would have had those guys that were already, you were already adjusted to them, you knew the personalities, you knew how they tried to keep you in step, you knew what you could expect from them. When you go over the way I did, all the training was in a group, was in thirties, and, you know, and the group is as important as the training. So its really how the group performs that's important. I thought I was trained adequately, but you know, just the process of joining a new group when you're in Vietnam after ten days, is a very hard process on a human being, it's a really tough—you're not adequately trained for that, no.

Kurtz: Ok. Did you have any military experience after Vietnam?

Deits: No, I did not.

Kurtz: So when came, how did you—

Deits: No, I did! No, I did, I went to Fort Riley, Kansas.

Kurtz: Ok.

Deits: Yeah. Sure.

Kurtz: Ok, so is that how you—went to Fort Riley and got discharged, what happened?

Deits: Uh, no we came back with the colors. First we stopped in Oakland, and there was a parade there. And then, we went to Fort Riley, retired the colors, and then I had five months and twenty one days. I tried to, to, to get a hundred and fifty day drop. I had twenty one days, and they couldn't find any unit that could, that would just take me, I mean, and actually they wanted me to come back with the colors. That, I was, I was in that, uh I don't know what the, the party is called, but I, I was—

Kurtz: Yeah.

Deits: I was selected, because the First Division that came back was just generally anybody leaving Vietnam. So most of the people coming back were not First Division members, they were just rotating out. And there was just a cadre of us, that's what we were, we were the cadre who came back, we're actually served the First Division, they wanted us to be a part of that, that welcome home. So I could not transfer out, I had twenty one more days. A hundred, a hundred, I had uh, you know, five months, twenty one days to serve. I also had thirty some days of leave, so I took some of that when I came back. Went to Fort Riley, Kansas, became a Platoon Sergeant, they sent me to NCO school to see if I'd re-up, that was really their—

Kurtz: Mhmm.

Deits: —Their ploy there. I did not re-up, so they basically busted me back to E5, they took away the E6 'cause it was only gonna go, I didn't matter, it was only on paper anyway. I never really served as an E6, but I was the Platoon Sergeant there, and I had young guys that were training to go to Vietnam, although Vietnam was pretty much at its end, so that was, so that became the part, is how do I train people, you know, about the next phase of their life and these kids were just coming into the—

Kurtz: So what kind of a unit were you in, was it an AIT, a Training Brigade, or something like—?

Deits: It was a Training Brigade, right.

Kurtz: So—did, did you take, how did you take this training responsibility, I mean did you, how'd you feel about that?

Deits: Well it was really, really hard, because it was, I mean you have to get these kids who are just in the lottery system then, and, and came in, and they really, it seemed like, they weren't taking it seriously, that they were really in a training brigade, you know. I, I don't know why they were, a) they didn't really want to be in the military, they were in the, they were lotterized* into the military, and they didn't really expect to have to go to Vietnam, 'cause you know, guys like me had just come back on, with the colors coming back, so why are, what are we doing this for? I mean, it was real hard to get discipline. Real hard.

Kurtz: When you brought the colors back, you said they retired the colors, so the Division was deactivated, or—?

Deits: Well the Division changed to the First Infantry— First Armor? I mean they changed the name of it. First Division exists, but it's in, it's in uh, Germany, yeah.

Kurtz: Ok, so they just, they did that paper transfer.

Deits: Right, that's what that's what you're talking about.

Kurtz: Ah, when you came home on leave, how were you received?

Deits: Uh—You know I, I thought sort of inadequately, meaning that it wasn't such, didn't seem like a big deal, to any— I mean, it did to me, that I came home, um—it seemed like, you know, everybody else's lives are just mov—just kept going, and, and there was no place to stop and say “Wow, let's celebrate this life coming, you know, my life coming home, um—and part of that was, is there were guys trickling back into communities almost every other day, or every day from that war, so it was, it was never one point in time. And I think the bigger part was, is I really had, I mean I had family to come back to, and I had some college friends, but they had moved on, some of them, one of them was working at IBM and he was down in Indianapolis and another guy was uh—you know, somewhere else, and, so even when I got back here to—could stabilize, and get back to the University of Wisconsin here, there's nobody here I went to school with.

Kurtz: Mhmm.

Deits: The whole thing had turned over and that just amazed me, I just thought life had, life would have, stopped, for a while.

Kurtz: Wow. I forgot to ask you when you came back, did you come back on a ship or a plane—

Deits: Plane.

Kurtz: Plane. So..—

Deits: Yeah.

Kurtz: And you said there was a parade in Oakland, what was that like?

Deits: Well that's, you know, that—that was, that's, this is the military, 'cause it was a, you know, we've been on the plane, it's a long day, it's a LONG twenty hours to get back; we'd stopped in Osaka, I think. So we were all jet lagged, and we were all [groans], and yet we had to get out and march around in a parade field, and have speeches, and there were political speeches, and—it probably took about three hours.

Kurtz: Ok.

Deits: And then we got back on the plane, and, and then, then we had to go to Fort Riley, from there.

Kurtz: Ok. When, ah—let's see. Now this is where it gets complicated. Uh, Tom, could you tell us what you do now?

Deits: Well I'm a readjustment counseling therapist, which is a government name for basically a social worker at the Madison Vets Center. Which is an organization, there are 206 nationwide, and they are established by Congress, and the legislation starts in '79 and the actual implementation '80 and '81, a storefront, small Vet. Centers, small counseling staves that work just primarily with combat veterans and help them um, you know ah, readjust to their long term experience to combat.

Kurtz: Did you get involved in this job because you felt you were inadequately received when you came home, is that—?

Deits: Uh, I got involved in it you know, one is, is I saw with my unit in Vietnam how people handled it. I mean how it, how much bigger war is than the person, and how much, ah, people will need—yeah, specialized care and I think you hit a good theme, which is, is that, basically there was inadequate, you know in the 70's, all the way through the 70's about how to help veterans return.

Kurtz: Ah—the reason I asked these questions is, is that, when we discussed before we started the tape, we belie—we believed that this whole Vet. Center issue and coming back deserves a different interview. So, we're not gonna go into anymore detail on that, but, how do you think about Vietnam now? I wanted to put on the record that, you know, you are kind of a professional in dealing with Vietnam, so how do you feel about it now? Personally?

Deits: Um—I think it's, you know, now that I'm thirty years plus past it, I think its part of life's experience, and it's a large part of it, but, but the problem is it becomes an entire identity for people. And you gotta have a, a, you know, we as human beings gotta have numerous identities, or numerous places where we know where we're, we know who we are, we know how we operate. I think the problem with Vietnam was, is that we assume we know so much about Vietnam because there've been movies and songs, and books, and stories, and, and, and, and yet, on the inside level, we still don't know how it really affects people. I think, I think Vietnam and the experience is still a mystery. Not historically, not politically, I think we know those points. But the impact on human beings is still a mystery, as to—I think, a great majority of veterans are very angry at the experience. I know I'm not so angry at it anymore, I mean I think its, it was a, a part of who I am, and it gave me a direction in life, and it put some of my priorities in order. Uh, so I'm not angry at the experience in Vietnam, I just, at this point in time I just think that its, it's a, almost like what you're doing here, or we're doing here, its, we're preserving. It's a preservation piece that, to explain to other generations that—you know, this is what went on for ten years, this is what America had to deal with. Not just Vietnam veterans, but families, and parents, and loved ones, and daughters afterwards. You know, if you got a college degree after four years, or you went to law school and you got a degree after 7 years, you would hang that on your wall and say “Look, I'm a graduate of this.” I don't think people do enough of that “I'm a graduate of Vietnam,” and I think if you had your choice, you could learn more in a war, I mean unfortunately, than you can in any other place on the planet, 'bout what's important. So I think it's still a very important piece of who I am, and I think, who other veterans are.

Kurtz: Ok, have you been active in any veteran organizations in addition to your job?

Deits: The answer is no.

Kurtz: Is there a reason for that?

Deits: The answer is yes, uh, I've always found that, that um—other organizations want to make it a, a government, political battle, a funding

battle. And I don't see it as that, I see it as the opposite of that, I see it as a personal readjustment situation, so if I take the road that this is a political, argumental*, you know the government—this is, this is a, a battle against government, rather than, I take the opposite. This is a battle internal to yourself, as to what you do with your life, not what government does with your life.

Kurtz: Ok, and do you think that possibly part of the reason you haven't joined one of these organizations is that you get plenty of contact with veterans day to day?

Deits: Absolutely! Absolutely.

Kurtz: Then the final question, have you attended any unit reunions?

Deits: I have not, although I just, interestingly I have four names right now, two of whom I just contacted from my unit, some of whom I've mentioned here. I have had contact with, separately, I mean I have, one of the Sergeants is in Lake Mills of all places so I see him quite frequently, and we commiserate. I lost contact with my, probably two of my best friends in Vietnam in the 90's, one of them died immediately after coming back from Vietnam in a car crash. Um—what else can I tell ya—and one guy who I met, who I really did realize how, you know, I think he probably won three Bronze Stars for valor, and it just, just didn't seem like, and I met him in Las Vegas where he was a bartender, uh, you know, and he was attending A.A. at the time, and just, so I've done some, some little stuff with guys, but—

Kurtz: Ok, well that completes it, is there anything else you'd like to say other than the fact that we're gonna probably do this again on a different level?

Deits: Nope. I'm, I've said more than enough, I'm sure of that.

Kurtz: Ok, well good, thanks a lot, Tom.

Deits: Thanks Jim.

[End of Interview]

* Deits uses these words in his interview.