

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
Robert S. Ficks  
Sergeant, Marine Corps, Vietnam War  
1995

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**Ficks, Robert S.**, (b. 1945). Oral History Interview, 1995.

User Copy: 3 sound cassettes (ca. 122 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 122 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Military Papers: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder)

**Abstract:**

Robert S. Ficks (b. 1945), a Mequon, Wisconsin resident, discusses his experiences in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 3<sup>rd</sup> Marines during the Vietnam War from 1964 to 1966. During the interview, Ficks refers to 35 mm slides of photographs he took in Vietnam and Japan. Ficks grew up in Shorewood, Wisconsin and was fascinated by World War II history. Ficks states he believed the Marine Corps propaganda that “if you’re going to join the military, join the best.” After one year at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Ficks enlisted in the Marines. He briefly mentions boot camp in San Diego (California) and details his physical conditioning and M14 rifle training at Camp Pendleton (California). He portrays the Marines as a diverse mix of ethnic, regional, educational, and class backgrounds and states there were no racial tensions. Ficks refutes a mistaken counter-culture image that Marines were automatons or “killing machines.” He describes cramped conditions on the ship to Vietnam in 1964. Ficks states Marines spent most of the journey reading paperbacks from the ship’s library or playing music. Ficks describes stopping in Okinawa (Japan) twice and enjoying its natural beauty and museums. In Vietnam, Ficks was stationed at Iron Bridge Ridge northwest of DaNang. He summarizes his combat experiences as “long periods of tedium interrupted by fleeting moments of sheer terror.” Ficks explains that the Viet Cong attacked sporadically, mostly at night. Booby traps were a bigger problem for Marines than small arms combat. Ficks touches upon various types of booby traps. Ficks mentions tanks and Ontos track vehicles were not effective in Vietnam because the terrain was unsuitable and required different strategies than World War II. Ficks describes going on patrols approximately every three days around Dong Den mountain. He estimates that one in seven patrols resulted in a confrontation with the enemy. Ficks does not remember the rules of engagement that were read to him but says Marines were always armed and would “cut loose” if fired on. Ficks characterizes communications revolving around operations as poor. He describes a friendly fire situation on a night patrol and an incident when his fighting hole was strafed by Navy planes. Ficks repeatedly states the main problem with the Vietnam War was the lack of a clearly defined goal. After thirteen months in country, he became disturbed by the rapid growth of military operations in Vietnam, illustrated by the expansion of the PX from a “fairly simple place to... the Southeast-Asian precursor of Wal-Mart.” Ficks emphasizes that Washington D.C. politicians were “clueless” and that Marines could not see a clear plan of action. Ficks reveals Marines would not complete all assigned patrols, as they kept retracing the same ground without an overarching mission. He also addresses the daily life of troops. Referencing his photographs, Ficks describes the

natural beauty of Vietnam and trips to China Beach for rest and relaxation. He says that pipe-smoking was popular and that Marines made sure to set up showers and paid attention to hygiene. He discusses the cons of their new uniforms which were made from less durable material. Ficks explains PX trucks would bring supplies like beer, soda, soap, tin foods, and radios to his post. There were no problems receiving care packages and mail at the base; he tells about a Mexican Marine whose mother always sent him authentic Mexican food to share with the unit. Ficks later reveals this Marine was killed by a booby trap a few days before he was to be discharged. Ficks recalls listening to Adrian Cronauer on the AFN radio network as well as news broadcasts and music. He tells a story about Marines reacting negatively to the song "The Ballad of the Green Berets" (a big hit in the U.S. that year) by throwing their radios out the window. Ficks recalls Morley Schafer of CBS News doing a report on his unit. A group of Marines took the news crew on a staged patrol in which they burned some empty huts. Ficks is critical of the U.S. media's portrayal of the Marines. He comments that raw footage from the field in Vietnam was harder for Americans to watch than the more propagandistic World War II newsreels. Ficks states that, unlike Morely Schafer portrayed, Marines never burned down occupied homes, only abandoned houses to prevent the Viet Cong from using them as outposts. Ficks criticizes the "idiotic body count mentality" of the military. Progress in the war was measured by the number of Viet Cong killed, causing some officers to inflate their casualty reports. Ficks is also critical of Defense Secretary Robert McNamara. He describes a "hearts and minds" mission north of DaNang where Marines provided medical care and tried to be friendly towards villagers. Ficks found this mission contrived. Nevertheless, he describes positive interactions with Vietnamese farmers near his post. He shows photographs of typical dwellings and bridges made from homemade boards. Ficks explains the demographics of the towns: mostly women, children, and old men. He comments that he found the Vietnamese people "amazingly self-sufficient" and was intrigued by the mixture of Catholic and Buddhist cultures. He enjoyed eating local food and preferred the charming countryside to the city. Ficks briefly discusses his participation in Operation Starlight and Operation Double Eagle. Ficks says that, while their booby traps were effective at slowing Marines, he was not impressed with the Viet Cong as an organized fighting force. He mentions that events in La Drang Valley introduced the Marines to the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) as a formidable force. Because Ficks served early in the war, he only had limited encounters with the NVA during Operation Starlight, near Chu Lai. Ficks describes his participation in some helicopter assaults in Operation Double Eagle. In general, Ficks praises his commanding officers, especially a brave Samoan platoon sergeant and Officer Woodward who would discuss Vietnam history with Ficks. He comments briefly that frequent rotation prevented unit cohesion. In 1966, Ficks was reassigned to Charleston (South Carolina) for the remainder of his four-year contract. While he did not face any hostility upon his homecoming, he noticed a "strange tension in the air." Ficks continued to grow distressed by the way the war was being pursued with bad political and military decisions and no end in sight. Ficks calls Nixon's brokered peace to end the war an "artifice." After his discharge in 1968, Ficks attended Milton College (Wisconsin) where he majored in English and History. Ficks mentions that the G.I. Bill only covered a small portion of his expenses. Ficks joined a veterans club on campus and witnessed a few

protests. He reports he did not encounter real hostility from students or faculty but mentions annoyance at younger students who protested the war with “only limited knowledge of what they were so angry about.” Ficks said veterans who served later were more traumatized by the Vietnam War than he was. He denies having flashbacks or lasting trauma. Ficks was briefly a member of the American Legion, and he expresses interest in attending a reunion for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 3rd Marines.

### **Biographical Sketch:**

Ficks (b. 1945) was born in Burlington (Iowa) and grew up in Shorewood (Wisconsin). After a year at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, he joined the Marines and served in the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Brigade, 2<sup>nd</sup> battalion, 3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Division in Vietnam for two years. From 1966 to 1968, he served in Charleston (South Carolina), and ended his career with the rank of sergeant. Ficks then attended Milton College (Wisconsin) and majored in English and History. To finance his studies, he worked briefly as a car salesman and a private detective. After graduation, he worked in retail management for a number of years. He now lives in Mequon, Wisconsin.

Interviews by Mark Van Ells, 1995

Transcribed by Karen Emery, 1998

Transcript edited by Darcy I. Gervasio, 2008

Abstract by Darcy I. Gervasio, 2008

**Interview Transcript:**

Mark: Okay. Today's date is November the 21st, 1995. This is Mark VanElls, Archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum doing an oral history interview this afternoon with Mr. Robert S. Ficks, a veteran of the Vietnam Conflict with the Marine Corps. Good afternoon. Thanks for coming in.

Ficks: Thank you very much, Mark. It's a pleasure to be here.

Mark: And thanks for bringing your slides. Now those listening or reading this transcript, you're going to have to bear with us here. Perhaps give Mr. Ficks a call to take a look at these slides but they're going to help illicit some conversation we hope. I suppose we should start at the top as they say. Why don't you tell me a little about where you were born and raised and what you were doing prior to your entry into the service.

Ficks: Okay. I was born in Burlington, Iowa on June 28, 1945, which also happens to be the same date that Archduke Francis Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo, Bosnia which started, as you know, the First World War. My father was the director of safety at the Iowa ordinance plant which was the largest producer of 81 millimeter mortar rounds during the Second World War, and I think we were still burning some of those up in the Vietnam Conflict.

Mark: Now, was he a civilian employee?

Ficks: He was a civilian employee. My father was one of those folks who was too young for World War I and too old for World War II. Shortly after the war ended he was transferred to Milwaukee. He was really a contract employee as I understand it, with Liberty Mutual Insurance. He was in charge of loss prevention in Wisconsin and the Upper Peninsula and I was raised in Shorewood, went through the school system there, graduated in 1963.

Mark: And up to your graduation had you given much thought to joining the military? I mean, this is before Vietnam hit the headlines. The thing is going on obviously.

Ficks: Well we knew about Dien Bien Phu and things were falling apart there in the early '60s.

Mark: As an 18 year old kid were you cognizant of this?

Ficks: Oh, sure. The Second World War was something that fascinated me, I read about heavily during my high school years, perhaps to the detriment of some of my other grades. But during the late '50s, early '60s there was a tremendous flood of books associated with World War II and a lot of

autobiographies. There was Pappy Boyington's Baa Baa Black Sheep and just a whole slew of others that I read and I think I still have at home in cartons. So we were aware that something is happening in Southeast Asia. If one was to plow through early issues of National Geographic there were features about how things were happening in Southeast Asia and Laos and in Vietnam and I'd given some thought to joining the Marine Corps, oh, probably through much of my adolescence. If you're going to join the military, join the best. Somehow or another their propaganda had worked its way into my subconscious. And after a year of school at UWM in Milwaukee I was heartily tired of sitting in classrooms, it looked like things were heating up over there, young and the testosterone level is high. I enlisted in the Marine Corps for 4 years; went through boot camp at San Diego — it was a 12 week cycle then — followed by 4 weeks at Camp Pendleton which was ITR, Infantry Training Regiment; then I had 30 days leave back home. The night we got our orders in boot camp the drill instructor, the senior drill instructor, was reading various MOS assignments, Military Occupation Specialties, and where people were being shipped and he read about half a dozen names — mine was one of them — and he said 1st Marine Brigade, Kane'ohe Bay, Hawaii, ha, ha, ha. They're in country with the 3rd Marine Division, are on their way in country. Finished up leave, went to Camp Pendleton again to wait to go overseas. I think I was the last group to go over on a ship. The appropriate day we boarded buses, went down to San Diego and boarded the USS Billy Mitchell, TAP114. I don't know what the heck the T-A-P stands for. And we sailed from San Diego to the Hawaiian Islands, had a day there; then to Okinawa, a couple of days in Okinawa; and then flew into DaNang on some Marine Corps C130, six flight; and waited until we got our unit assignments. I was assigned to the 2nd Battalion Third Marines, Third Marine Division.

Mark: I want to back track a little bit if I could.

Ficks: Sure.

Mark: Basic training. I went to basic training about 20 years later and it was in the Air Force. It wasn't exactly the same sort of thing I would imagine. And I've got certain memories of screaming, yelling, the name calling and that sort of thing. Describe the atmosphere of basic training, what sort of training did you do? How much of it was weapons and how much of it was classroom? And who was joining the Marines at this time? Sort of give me ...

Ficks: The Marine Corps training was not quite as rough as it had been prior to Ribbon Creek, an incident at Parris Island, I believe in '54, when some recruits were lost but it was still pretty damn rigorous and tough. The drill instructors played roles. You had a good one, a bad one, and then there was the senior drill instructor. There was very little, let's say corporal activity on

their part. There was an occasional punch or an occasional jab. Extremely physical. Lots of running, lots of PT, lots of obstacle course, lots of marching, incredible amount of marching. there was classroom work covering things like basic military lessons, introduction to weapons, Marine Corps history, things of that order. And more marching and more PT. It was sort of a shock. I was somewhat prepared for it because one of the recruiters said, "You're going to hate me for about the first six months of your Marine Corps experience but after awhile you'll see why we do it all this way." About half way through the 12 week cycle, there was a 3 week increment given over to the rifle range which was up at Camp Pendleton, and that's where you were really introduced to the M14. Well, you carried one and then there was one available for drill and cleaning and familiarization. This is where you got to know it, you got to know what it was like to shoot it. That's how they would develop your skills as a marksman and then finally you would qualify during the last week.

Who was joining the Marine Corps? That's always been a fascinating thing to talk about because there's this, or there was this misconception about who Marines were and what they wound up like after boot camp and infantry training and there's no simple answer. I met a number of young men like myself who came from what could be described as middle class backgrounds, who had grown tired of school, wanted a little adventure, wanted to set out on their own. I met kids who probably had their first pair of real shoes courtesy of the Marine Corps. A number of Northern blacks, a number of Southern blacks, just a huge range of people. It's sort of interesting that sometimes the Northern blacks were as amazed at Southerners and Southern black as anyone else was. It was a tremendous opportunity to learn about other people. I spent some time in the South as a child, vacationing and the like, and it wasn't a complete shock but some of the folks you met were kind of interesting. It was really an incredible cross-section, Mark. You could not stereotype these people. Education ranged from, yeah, we had the high school drop out, we had the guy who probably on a good day could pull 85 IQ points, you had a few that were there because the judge said it's this or some sort of correctional facility.

Mark: There were some.

Ficks: There were some.

Mark: 'Cause the Marine Corps prides itself on its elite image.

Ficks: Yes.

Mark: And I would have thought that most of those types would have gone to the Army — who wasn't necessarily happy to have them either but I would expect less of that in the Marine Corps.

Ficks: There were a few. There was a certain folklore about that but there were a few around who were given the option and what happened at the end of training, by and large it would have worked out. There were a few people that didn't go on to be successes in their service career but by and large you got through training and you were still yourself. You weren't some sort of automaton, you weren't a killing machine, you're not the sort of stereotype that a number of, let's say the counter-culture elements of the time thought all Marines were. A couple of guys I knew even finished their bachelors degree. Another one I met in IT earned a masters in some variety of chemistry. He was just looking for a change in his life. Not everybody with a college degree went the OCS route.

Mark: Yeah. Now, in terms of this diverse mix of people — I mean I was in in the early 1980s. There wasn't a civil rights movement and desegregation going on at all. Were there any sort of tensions, racially for example?

Ficks: Generally, no. None that I perceived, and maybe I wasn't quite as attuned to it. Most of the tensions that I detected were personal ones. There was, certainly, animosities between and among whites. There were animosities between and among blacks. I had a couple of blacks that were friends. A couple of whites who were friends. We'd go off base and have some beers. By and large we were kind of thinking of ourselves as Marines.

Mark: When you went off base — that brings up another thing I was going to bring up anyway. I mean, did you get to do that very often while you were in training? And if so, what did you do?

Ficks: No. In boot camp you do not have any liberty.

Mark: I didn't think so.

Ficks: In ITR you got one weekend off and, generally, everybody went to Disneyland. Well, Disneyland liked service men, you were in uniform and it was rather hard not to stand out, but usually that was the first time that anybody had a legal drink — there hadn't been any drinking a number of months — and it was sort of interesting.

Mark: Now, when I was in training there was a very clear perception of who the enemy was. It was the Soviet Union. There was no question about it. A lot of the training, a lot of the rhetoric, and a lot of the things that you were told to do made reference to the Soviet Union being the primary enemy. Now, in the



early '60s there's the Vietnam thing, there's the Cuba thing going on. I'm interested in who you were training to fight.

Ficks: We were training to fight in Southeast Asia. There was always, at that time, the specter of the Soviet Union. We were certainly aware of their involvement in Cuba but the defined hot spot, the focus appeared to be, was perceived by some our national interest was in Southeast Asia. We had the Tonkin Gulf issues, we'd had the general escalation there. Certainly before they committed the Marines and other large units after the Tonkin Gulf events— *event*, apparently, according to General Geoff (??) in his encounter with McNamara the other day— we were aware in basic training that there had been Marine presence there on some special level. I think Special Forces had been there, we'd been doing some wet work well before the large troop commitments.

Mark: So, when you found out you were going to Vietnam, I'm interested in your reaction. Your personal reaction.

Ficks: Well, I wasn't surprised. I was anticipating it even before the announcement the night we got our orders. Having an O311 infantry MOS, I was fairly confident that I would wind up in Southeast Asia.

Mark: Now, is that what you sought when you went in?

Ficks: Well, in the case of the Marine Corps, you serve at the Marine Corps' discretion or did. The Corps put you where it thought you would do, where it wanted you to be, and I simply wound up in the infantry. I had another friend who joined shortly after I did who wound up in the motor transport and he didn't have a drivers license and he has almost no depth perception but the Marine Corps deemed him to be an appropriate candidate to drive truck.

Mark: I guess that makes sense in some way perhaps. So, yeah, there was a saying at the time, if I'm correct — three kinds of Marines, those in Vietnam, those going to Vietnam, and those coming back.

Ficks: Coming back.

Mark: So it wasn't a surprise to you at all?

Ficks: No, not really.

Mark: I'm interested in your personal experience the first time you went to Vietnam and the trip over there. You talk to soldiers and read the soldier narratives they often have very distinct recollections of being on the airplane with the stewardesses and landing and that sort of thing. You were there much earlier so it's probably a little different.

Ficks: Well, as I said, we went over on a ship and I don't know how many of us were on this thing but there were an awful lot of us. The accommodations were god-awful. The forward hole where they had bunks stacked right on top of each other was reeking with diesel fuel so on any night it was pleasant outside we usually slept on deck. Food was terrible. Tinned corned beef, powdered eggs, and since it was very hard to manage that number of troops frequently you'd just go down and check out the candy machines and soda machine and call that lunch or dinner. The only thing that made it tolerable was, one, the Pacific is extraordinarily beautiful and we just had all kinds of books to read. I think I went through all the available James Bond titles. So you looked out and reflected at the beauty of the ocean and went back to whatever paperback you'd been able to trade off for someone who wanted one that you had.

Mark: Now, I've talked to World War II vets going overseas and they always relate their seasickness stories. Did you have much of that?

Ficks: Actually, some people became seasick. The closest I came was when we had a day when it was almost as smooth as glass and you lost the horizon reference. But there was not mass seasickness or illness. We also did not hit heavy seas. Going over the waters were fairly calm. And the Mitchell was a large ship.

Mark: Yeah. So, you went to Hawaii and then to Okinawa and then you flew into DaNang.

Ficks: We had three days in Okinawa to get organized, waiting around, whatever. Not a lot was accomplished. And we flew out early in the morning, I think from Kadina into DaNang and then were assigned to various units, trucked out to the regimental headquarters and out into the field.

Mark: And so from landing, just describe, walk me through the steps of what sort of things you do and where did you end up exactly?

Ficks: I ended up, my first night in the country, in a position called "Iron Bridge Ridge" which was a couple of bumps of land sitting in a rice paddy. In terms of direction, it was north-northwest of DaNang, out on a little, protecting a little bridge that was associated with this position, in a bunker. And issued my gear and suddenly I was there, in country, in the field.

Mark: In a day.

Ficks: In a day.

Mark: The day, you went from the airplane to the field in a matter of hours.

Ficks: Literally in a matter of hours, yes.

Mark: And how long was it until you started getting shot at? I mean, how hot was this area?

Ficks: This was not a hot area. In fact, in my entire time in country you would go days and there would be no action and in terms of encountering large forces, no we really didn't. We were fighting small unit actions in and around the DaNang defensive position. I was involved in Operation Starlight which was a major operation in Chu Lai, south of DaNang. It was one of the first times that the Marines encountered, I believe, the NVA. But we were on the periphery of that and I would not describe any of the action we saw as particularly heavy. Most of the events that we were involved in with small arms fire was one or two of the locals taking a pot-shot at us. Our real war, if you will, was with booby traps. The area was heavily booby-trapped with a wide variety of mechanisms — chi kung (??) grenades, sometimes our own grenades that were found in the field, lord knows how they wound up with the VC, sometimes larger, more bizarre things such as one time we encountered an 8-inch naval round that apparently had not gone off and had been cobbled into this booby-trap. It was discovered and detonated. And then the day we took seven casualties, one KIA, was a case where an engineering shape charge had been filled with nuts, bolts, God knows whatever, concealed and aimed down a rice paddy that was command detonated. Of the Purple Hearts that were awarded in the platoon — I, unfortunately, did not receive one; I was quite blessed — they were all from booby-traps, all shrapnel. If you look at any combat situation, the number of people who were killed or hit by small arms fire is very small. Shrapnel from artillery or mortars does the real killing.

Mark: Um, sort of two questions in one. (a) Is this what you expected when you got there? And (b) In terms of your training, I mean, were you prepared for this sort of thing? And thinking back to your training, could they have done things differently? Perhaps did they do things with later generations of recruits — you were early after all.

Ficks: I can't speak to what happened after me. Was it what I expected? Let's say it didn't come as a surprise. In talking to some people who had been there and just hearing stories, it wasn't a great surprise but you're never really prepared for the reality. As far as the training, training serves a couple of different functions. Boot camp is designed to condition the mind as well as the body to what we'll call the existential quality with combat and the infantry training was, again, an introduction to fairly traditional infantry tactics, and also exposure to virtually the entire range of infantry level small arms, together with more physical condition. Lectures on a wide variety of things would be

of value to somebody who was in the infantry. Was it specifically aimed at small unit tactics in Southeast Asia? No. Did it translate? Yes. Did it leave you mentally prepared for what you were going to encounter? I think the answer is yes.

Mark: I suppose it's time to move on to some of the pictures.

Ficks: Okay.

Mark: Here we have the Marine Corps emblem.

Ficks: Yes. I believe from one of the memorials in Okinawa. You're also going to get to see some snapshots of me when I was much younger and much thinner. These were taken outside the family home in Shorewood. Yes, I had a set of "blues." Still hangs in my closet at home.

Mark: I don't think the Marine Corps uniforms changed.

Ficks: Very little. And no, I can't get into it.

Mark: I wasn't going to ask.

Ficks: Full disclosure. This is off to the airport. These were the old H-frame barracks at Camp Pendleton. "H" because if you looked at them, there were two arms for squad bays, then the connecting area in between. They've been around since probably before the Second World War. There's a picture of one of them.

Mark: I see, yeah.

Ficks: Some of the guys from my unit. Pipe smoking was a very big thing for some reason. I don't know why but it was the thing to do. Just a general picture of Camp Pendleton. It's pretty bleak real estate. This is when we were staging to go down and meet the ship in San Diego. Another one of my friends. He was a Southern boy with a degree in English literature. There's all the gear staged to be put on the trucks. You had two sea bags, a garment bag, and a "ditty" bag. Loading the luggage up. Now, that's at the dock in San Diego. Horribly overexposed. Picture of Marines waiting. One of the dominant themes of any military career.

Mark: Hurry up and wait.

Ficks: This is aboard the ship. What can you say? Sitting around waiting, crossing the ocean. This is a hose, a large diameter hose that's running up from our sleeping accommodations that was attached to a blower trying to vent the

diesel fuel fumes I was mentioning to you. It was only moderately successful. There's a shot down into the troop accommodations. Some variety of miscellaneous naval vessel outside of Pearl Harbor. Hotel Street, the infamous Hotel Street.

Mark: Why is it infamous?

Ficks: That was apparently a hot bed of prostitution during the Second World War.

Mark: Is that in Honolulu?

Ficks: Yes. There's the old Royal Hawaiian. Some of these are hopelessly snap shot. Diamond Head was completely obliterated by hotels. That was the bunk I was assigned at the bottom of, I think, about eight or nine of those in the hold of the ship. That's the bridge of the Mitchell. Stern of the Mitchell. Like I said, there wasn't a whole lot to do when you're crossing the Pacific. A little improvisational music group on the fantail.

Mark: How'd they get the drum set on board?

Ficks: I think it was part of Special Services on board the ship. Throwing some old lumber over the side. I have no idea what the purpose of that was. The Navy was always something of a mystery to me. That's arriving actually in Yokohama harbor where we spent part of a day.

Mark: That's a nice shot.

Ficks: Thank you. Fishing boats. Basic CD service-oriented bar.

Mark: Is that Okinawa?

Ficks: No, that's still in Yokohama. Some of my fellow Marines. Guy on the left wound up in Force Reconnaissance.

Mark: What sort of camera did you have?

Ficks: A Konika, I had a Konika. I still have it; it doesn't work any more. It didn't survive a tumble down a hill into a rice paddy. This is in Okinawa. Those are the Quonset huts that we had in Okinawa.

Mark: And you can see here the big cables running over them.

Ficks: That are designed to keep those in place during typhoons. Another squad bay shot. Laundry bag on the end of the bunks.

- Mark: Looks like Gomer Pile.
- Ficks: Hey. That was a rat trap. Okinawan rats are really quite impressive. That is a lavatory in Vietnam.
- Mark: Was that on a hilltop or something?
- Ficks: It was on a hilltop.
- Mark: Seems a little precarious.
- Ficks: You put them where you put them. This was, and things are going a little out of sequence here, the slides, but this is the rear area closer to DaNang, not out in the field. Another over-exposed shot of that. The squad platoon tents scattered all over. This is where you shave in the morning. I'm pleased that the colors really held up pretty well considering the age of these.
- Mark: These last two shots especially.
- Ficks: You get some sense of just the incredible intensity of the greens.
- Mark: Now, what's going on here?
- Ficks: We're going off on a little "search and destroy" operation, boarding CH-34 helicopters which were really kind of on the end of their operational life at this point.
- Mark: That one looks like a [unintelligible] balloon.
- Ficks: Going on board the helicopters. The first one was when it was landing. Here we are boarding it.
- Mark: Perhaps you don't remember this particular mission but what are you told to go out and do?
- Ficks: I think this is when we're going out to look for elephant shit, if you'll pardon me.
- Mark: Oh, I've heard worse. What does it mean?
- Ficks: Well, the theory being that elephants could be used to carry large weapons or large amount of stores ...
- Mark: I see.

Ficks: Again, that was the scuttlebutt. But essentially we got in helicopters, flew out, wandered around a village, and came back. Here's a shot inside the helicopter looking at the helicopter's side gunner. Here we've landed. You can see that there's a Huey gun ship circling up here and there wasn't a whole lot of form to this operation. You can see the Marines straggling out over the paddies.

Mark: So, before you go out you're told you're looking for this and that.

Ficks: You're not told a heck of a lot. We're having an operation, we're going to go out and, just going to go out on an operation. Communications or dissemination of information specifically about the operation was generally not that good.

Mark: You read some of the literature and some veterans will say that basically the infantry, grunt, was used as bait. You're to go out and try to make contact with the Vietcong or the North Vietnamese, pull back, and then let artillery for an hour blast them. Is that ...

Ficks: I wouldn't say we were necessarily used as bait during my time there. I think there were, I can't say. I never had that perception. We generally had support with us. There was a Huey in the background.

Mark: Which is a gun ship.

Ficks: In this case it was a gun ship. We could frequently get close air if we felt the need for it. Artillery was frequently available. The hard thing to get authorization to use was a tank gun. — if you had a tank operating with you. Actually, having tanks in Vietnam was something of a waste because it's not a terrain, or much of it's not, suited to tanks. There were no other tanks to shoot at so as a fighting system, they were not particularly effective during my phase of time in the country. Here's a picture of a fairly standard Vietnamese dwelling with the thatched roof and the woven bamboo sides. Here we have a Huey launching rockets at some real or imagined target in this notch in the ridge line.

Mark: Now, you say "real or imagined." It was not always clear?

Ficks: I have no idea why they fired those rockets in this particular operation. At this point we were not receiving any fire. Perhaps they saw something. I'm not going to speak for the helicopter pilot. This was our corpsman for my initial period of time in country — one of those Navy guys who one day wakes up in the morning and discovers he's been assigned to the Marine Corps. I will say that all the corpsmen that were assigned to duty with us were outstanding guys. They just were excellent, they worked very hard, some volunteered for FMF duty, Fleet and Marine Force duty, some didn't but they were certainly a

credit to themselves and were just wonderful when there were casualties. The plume out there is a napalm strike. Obviously, you can't see it in here but a couple of Phantoms flew over, this was relatively early in the morning, and we were watching them not having a whole lot else to do, and you can see them going in for a pass and that was the end result.

Mark: Now, are you on "search and destroy" here or is this close to where you're based?

Ficks: This is close to where we're based. This is a little R&R; you can't make it out yet but we're headed over to one of the beaches. That's an Asahi beer (??) in my hand. For a little R&R.

Mark: Now, there's the infamous China Beach. Is that where this is? Or is this someplace different?

Ficks: Uh hum, it's China Beach. The amtrac brought us down there which was real nice. They spent most of their time working on their equipment. Here was another event. It would be something else with amtrac. This is an old cast iron bridge running from that little bridge I mentioned to you up to Iron Bridge Ridge. The hill in the background is Hill 1000; one of the really dominant terrain features around the DaNang area. And this is Iron Bridge Ridge, getting the name from that bridge we saw in the earlier slide. You can see the scarred surface where the various fortifications have been put in. This was one of the bunkers I occupied. The fellow up there holding the rifle is from Massachusetts. His name was Forget (sp??). Another view from that position, looking out over the rice fields. You can see some water buffalo and people tending their crops.

Mark: So, this is near your base camp, too. So there were farmers right near by.

Ficks: Oh, yes. Between Iron Bridge Ridge and the bridge we were protecting — I'm finished with that slide — there was a small village and we'd have some exchange with the people. They had a little bit of English, a little bit of French, I had a little bit of French, some of us had a little bit of Vietnamese, and you'd buy some things from them and our relations with most of those people were pretty good.

Mark: I see.

Ficks: The view from the position and you can just see how lush and green everything is. This is looking more to the north. In fact, one night we were on a patrol wandering along there when we started to get a serious amount of incoming fire. I think I was closer to being killed by friendly fire than by enemy fire. I was ...



Mark: It was American fire you were getting.

Ficks: Oh, yeah. We knew it was American fire we were getting. Somebody saw some movement and panicked and started popping off rounds and the radio man had to come up and say, "For Gods sakes, stop shooting." Another time on an operation I was digging a small fighting hole and out of the corner of my eye these huge clumps of earth were coming up about 15 yards away and we'd just been strafed. A Navy plane, poor communications, we had air panels out, shouldn't have happened but this guy comes along and lays a string of 20-millimeter fire just to the right of our position going down the hill. The perception is always sort of interesting because in my memory in the case of that and some of the events with the booby-traps is you think about it, the visual impression is first in your mind before the sound. It all happened like that but I have this sense in my recollection that there's this huge clumps of earth and then the sound came in later. I look up and here's the backside of a Crusader jet? It wasn't a Marine plane; it was a Navy plane. And that was a little bit eerie.

Mark: So, on these missions about how often would you go out? Was it every day? Once a week?

Ficks: Well, when we were set up in a position like Iron Bridge Ridge or Hill 92, which we'll get to, where you would have, you'd probably be out, in the course of three days you'd have a day patrol and maybe a night ambush or a night patrol depending if it was a company position or a platoon position. If it was a platoon position, you'd probably have a day time patrol, a night ambush or patrol, and then a day off.

Mark: And at this point it's Vietcong that you're fighting? Or are you hitting NVA at this time?

Ficks: At this point this is all VC, all VC. That's another one of the large mountains northwest of DaNang. Dong Den I believe the name of it was. We usually called in Gunga Din. We operated around it. I think we probably got half way up it at some point or another.

Mark: Find anything? And were there VC on this?

Ficks: No. What you found was incredibly lush vegetation. Sometimes there were vestigial paths through there; sometimes there weren't. Sometimes you wondered what was possessing decision makers in the back about sending you to these locations. At one point we were actually working off of what were essentially French maps and the French do many things well but cartographers they are not. There's another shot from Iron Bridge Ridge which is sort of

pastoral view of Vietnam. This is another position. This is west of DaNang and pile of sandbags, there we are, one of the guys just sitting there. The ubiquitous mutt dogs that were wandering around the area. That's not a very good looking fighting hole with that improvised sun shade over the top. Another luscious view of Vietnam; clouds in the background, flooded rice paddies.

Mark: You shoot them now and a lot of veterans were impressed by the landscape.

Ficks: Oh, it's "eat your eyes out." We did an amphibious assault north of DaNang. They took a couple of companies and put us on LCUs, some garden variety of naval flat-bottom, fall-down-front assault ship and we sailed from DaNang up the coast — I think 17, 18 miles. There we were seasick; it was kind of rough. People were losing it all over the place. And we had, it was by Navy standards, a dry landing. We were only wet up to our waist. And encountered almost no resistance. Got to the top of this hill and you could look out to the north and there was another hill. In between was this beautiful bay with these little estuaries naturally running into it, running off into the distance in the mountains and just an incredible vista, a stunning vista. These are some of the sand dunes between the beach and the, running inland before you get to the agriculture ground. It was a nice area to patrol. It was a nice area to camp out on at night because there generally weren't any mosquitoes there.

Mark: I bet.

Ficks: Another basic Vietnamese home. Another picture of the countryside with a little temple off in the distance up the hill. You can see how lush and well the rice is coming along. What more could you want? A grass and bamboo hut, your own water buffalo.

Mark: So you were running across little villages like this?

Ficks: Well, they were all over.

Mark: And when it came to finding the VC ...

Ficks: You had women of many ages, children, older men, men of our age if you will or into their middle years, were just generally not there. Here's a case of one of our corpsmen ministering to the needs of a gentleman who I think has got conjunctivitis or something and kids standing around looking at the doc, one of them looking at me, some Marines in the back. It looks like we're taking quite a break 'cause they've got their boots off.

Mark: Was that back at your base or was that out on patrol?

- Ficks: This is on a patrol.
- Mark: So, you go through a village and I don't get the impression you were often entirely worried if it was VC or not.
- Ficks: No. During the day you seldom had a sense of concern and if you did receive any sort of fire it was from a distance and not too serious. We generally took the policy if we took any incoming fire, we just cut loose with everything we had. Not too long after I had arrived in country word was getting around about the events in the La Drang Valley. In fact, not too short a time afterwards the Saturday Evening Post had a piece on it. There were also a couple of stories, one of which I think made Stars and Stripes, about an Army squad being wiped out to a man. Well, we just normally took the precaution of (1) always having a machine-gun with us, maybe two; an M-79 grenade launcher would be along, maybe two; and we were all carrying M-14s, this was before the arrival of the M-16, and by hook or by crook everybody came up with a selector so everybody had an automatic M-14, and you generally carried a fair amount of ammunition and if you took any fire, you thought nothing about letting a couple of magazines off in the general direction of the target. Shoot at me will you?
- Mark: So, in terms of rules of engagement. Now, this is something that comes up all the time.
- Ficks: There were rules of engagement.
- Mark: ... conflict.
- Ficks: Yes, which were read to us. And for the life of me I don't really remember the rules of engagement. I found it bizarre. I don't know if I have a copy of them at home or not. And the rules of engagement as I understand it became more complex ...
- Mark: As time went on.
- Ficks: ... as time went on.
- Mark: Again, you're there extremely early.
- Ficks: We're there real early. When we arrived the Air Force was set up in squad tents on pallets around the DaNang aid base. When I left it's stone structures, the PX went from being a fairly simple place to get a simple transistor radio to kind of the Southeast Asian precursor of Wal-Mart. The evolution just in that 13 month period. And that was a little disturbing to me because I'm thinking we're here, we don't really have a well-defined goal, we're sure turning this

into southern California. Here's all this tremendous support, all of these ancillary people.

Mark: That thought occurred to you at the time.

Ficks: Oh, yeah, because at that point I was realizing things were not going as they should. When you take the Marine Corps and you set it into permanent positions, something is seriously awry.

Mark: They should be on move.

Ficks: They should be moving. A Marine officer was taught a doctrine that was different than an Army officer. Marines were conditioned to give your all, coming out of the experiences in the South Pacific, and here you are doing sort of custodial work, military custodial work. We're sitting here, we're keeping our hooches clean, and there was no real objective to what we're doing. There was no, you could not detect any plan. The thing was just so hideously confused. And those of us that had some political sense or some political feeling were realizing that the folks in Washington really didn't have a clue as to what the hell they were doing, what they were doing with our lives.

Mark: Did you talk about that much amongst yourselves. I mean, again, you're all kids. Perhaps you don't get as philosophical as you would today but I'm interested in the mind-set.

Ficks: To some extent it was a function of ones education, one's let's say, how far up the, how do I say this without sounding snotty? The kids that had college backgrounds tended to think about it more but there was sort of an intuitive sense that things weren't as they should be. There was a certain dissatisfaction because we weren't really being permitted to do something. Certainly the staff NCOs didn't say anything specifically but a lot of these guys had seen action in Korea, some had been in World War II, and shooting the bull with them some moaning "What are we doing? We're just sitting here. What's this all about?"

Mark: So, as you read in Vietnam literature, again, the ability to not capture ground and keep it but to just take the patrols out and go back and have the enemy occupy the same place it had before. Was that your experience? I suppose I should start out with (a); and (b) if that's the case, that was frustrating.

Ficks: It came down to being sort of a "grab ass" session. We'd go into these positions which were relatively secure. In many cases they'd been former French positions. The French had put numerous hardened sites up around the country during their tenure there. And you go out on patrols and, as I alluded to earlier, the people who were coming up with these patrol routes hadn't been

on the ground. They didn't know where the heck they were sending you. Am I going to say we'd occasionally fudge a patrol? Yeah, we'd fudge a patrol.

Mark: In what sense?

Ficks: We might not go to the objective. There was a village called Hoi Vuk (sp??) which was near Hill 92 that generally no one was there during the day but it had a reputation as being a VC town and to get there you had to cross the river. One night we crossed the river and lost a guy to a booby-trap. That was the first time I had the opportunity to call in the medivac at night, and I'll say this to the credit of the helicopter pilots that I dealt with, they had a lot of courage. But we did bring the copter in on a spit of land between two rivers — put fuel tabs out so you could have some idea of where to come in. It's a low intensity light. But I know that he was as thrilled to be there as we were. On another occasion I mentioned that shape charge. Obviously there were more wounded there than a medivac copter could carry and what we did was we triaged them and the most serious, all but one, who has the least serious of the wounds, got those in the medivac copter, the gun ships orbiting, and then we waited until the slick was out of there carrying the others, and he came in. Gun ships don't want to do that but he said, "I'm coming in. I'm not stopping. I'm not touching down. The door will be open." So he comes in slowly and the fellow who had been the least wounded is propelled into the gun ship and I later heard that he thinks he was more seriously damaged being thrown into the gun ship than he was by the booby-trap.

Mark: So, the decision not to go. Who was that? NCO, lieutenants?

Ficks: Squad leader. These, most of these were squad patrols and squad leader would be a sergeant, maybe a corporal. At this point in my career I was carrying both the radio and the grenade launcher. You just say, "Hey, we're not going to cross the river." During the day you wouldn't fudge patrol. You wouldn't have to. But you had the sense that these people in the back had no idea what the hell they were doing. Why are they sending us here? What is the purpose of this patrol? And that was a sense that was kind of developing because you'd go through the same terrain with some regularity. A little cultural anthropology —

Mark: Yeah, it's an interesting shot.

Ficks: These are some Vietnamese making boards out of a tree.

Mark: Very much different than Shorewood, I imagine.

Ficks: Well, it was.

- Mark: I'm interested in the combat soldier's perspective on the cultural and social gulf between the Vietnamese and the Americans.
- Ficks: Uh, intriguing question. There was a veneer of French colonialism here. You did have a society that was a mixture of Buddhism and Catholicism with a few other minor sects around there. I found the Vietnamese people generally rather interesting. They're very tough. You know they've been fighting wars on one level or another for a very long time. I didn't view it as an inferior culture. I viewed it as one that was much different. Some things I thought were great. I loved the local food. I generally didn't have any qualms about eating with the locals out in the country. I did not get, I was in DaNang once on liberty and was, I found the city less appetizing than the country.
- Mark: Why was that?
- Ficks: I think I just generally find the countryside more appetizing than the city but the city was a little old and dirty and smelly. But the countryside was really quite charming. And the people, as you can see here, were amazingly self-sufficient.
- Mark: Yeah.
- Ficks: They balance themselves on those boards to get a little extra energy and then they'd flip it over and finish up and they were really amazingly good boards. That's what they're finishing up there.
- Mark: Is this a canal or something?
- Ficks: I think it's a tapioca field, cultivated that way. I tanned up too much.
- Mark: That's you.
- Ficks: That's me. There's an old French truck. That thing actually ran. That was owned by a local entrepreneur. This is a little bridge that the Marines had built, the engineers had built, over a rivulet. It was a rivulet for about eight months out of the year and then during the monsoon season it started to look a lot like the Rock River. And little bridges like this were important because there were many of these little rivulets and if they were knocked out, the predecessor had been knocked out by VC sappers, it impacted the commerce and the way of life of these little communities. Uh, just a shot of a couple of elderly Vietnamese women carrying their wares in those shoulder sticks. Couple of little girls in the "vil" with one of our squad leaders. Another general shot of a Vietnamese residence. That was an Ontos. Why did the Marines bring the Ontos to Vietnam?

- Mark: The Ontos is the tank.
- Ficks: It's not really a tank. It was one of these ideas that you got funded in the '50s when any idea that came out of the Pentagon got funded. It's not really an armored vehicle. It is a track vehicle. It's carrying six, 106-recoilless rifles.
- Mark: I've never seen such a thing.
- Ficks: There weren't many of them. The idea was that it was light, it was, could be dropped by the air, air drop, it could be easily brought in on a relatively light assault vehicle, and a 106 could defeat a tank. So here we've got six 106-recoilless rifles mounted on this light, fast vehicle. Problems? Well, one had to get out of the minimal protection of the body of the vehicle to load them, it was aimed, the rounds were aimed really by using a spotting rifle — this was not any sort of sophisticated aiming device — and it couldn't carry a lot of ammunition.
- Mark: That's why they weren't around very long.
- Ficks: It was not a particularly successful concept. There's the bridge that was our position. The fellow waving was the right guide. The can that's behind him is the shower.
- Mark: Now, that's the bridge you first went to when you first got there.
- Ficks: Right, first got there. Again, two little Vietnamese children with a fellow whose nickname was "Amtrak." This picture really doesn't give an idea of how massively he was built. He was from Alabama and regarded the highest human art form as drag racing. Just another shot, I think this was from the commode out in the field. Another view. Water's a little higher here. That was inside of one of the bunkers, your packs, writing gear, stakes designed to reinforce the sandbag walls.
- Mark: Now, that's not where you sleep necessarily. This is if there was an attack you go into a place like this.
- Ficks: You might sleep in there, you might not. You would sleep in there during the day if you had some time off just to be out of the sun. Generally, I'd sleep on top of the bunker and in retrospect I'm amazed at how little sleep I got. If it was a moonlit night, there'd probably be absolutely no chance of any sort of enemy action and it was beautiful — watch the sky. And if there was no moon, well, then you might want to stay up and be attentive to matters. A little village off in the distance. Some tactical wire that we laid. And another little cement Buddhist shrine. I don't know what the heck I've got. I think I was finishing up the roll of film to send it off home to get it developed. He

was one of the local carrier — by the way, you can see the socks and the clothes drying on the wire. One of the first things you do upon getting in a new position is setting up a shower. We were big on showers and we were by and large very keen on personal hygiene and cleanliness. If you didn't look after your feet, if you just didn't get that tidied up, it could be very unpleasant.

Mark: Of course you were in a steady position.

Ficks: Uh hum.

Mark: Again, to go back to World War II, when you think of Willy and Joe and the scraggly bearded guys and the Vietnam War later on.

Ficks: When you're on the move, it was much more difficult. If you're on an operation, it was a lot harder to do it but it was amazing how almost instinctive the desire to stay squared away and look out for your personal hygiene was.

Mark: And, of course, you're Marines.

Ficks: But we didn't spit shine our boots. This gentleman was in his 70s, amazingly fit, did all kinds of little things, had a garden, would occasionally go into DaNang and sell some of his produce. That's a reconnaissance drone coming down on a parachute. It probably had been up north taking pictures. Here's a Huey gun ship. Splashdown. I really wish I had had a telephoto lens but I had enough gear. This is my one day in DaNang. That was a restaurant on the river. The main drag. Old Peugeot, another gift from the French.

Mark: There seem to have been quite a lot of, quite a few French leftovers. I suppose in a place like DaNang, especially, 'cause it was such a large colonial center.

Ficks: Yes. That was a bunch of guys practicing parachute landing. I don't know who the heck they were 'cause I don't know if there is any actual use of parachute troops in Vietnam or not. Maybe in a special, limited scale. This was back at the battalion area. There they are jumping out of a helicopter. Probably Force Reconnaissance. Back in the rear with the gear. Drainage ditches cut between the squad tents.

Mark: Now, again, you were there fairly early and we discussed a little bit about this, in terms of the amenities of home that you had available to you. You mentioned a PX and that sort of thing. You mentioned how all that grew as time went on.



- Ficks: We did not get back to the PX. There would be PX trucks that would come out to the positions, maybe on a fortnightly basis and have things for sale — soap, some tin foods, odds and ends.
- Mark: So, if you want like a Coke ...
- Ficks: Uh, soda pop and beer were not a problem. Once you were set in, we had an ice chest in case of, a portion of my stay the right guide was in charge of that and he'd cut deals and normally you got two beers a day or two sodas a day. Beyond that you had to pony up some money.
- Mark: Which wasn't a problem.
- Ficks: Which wasn't a problem. You're paid in military payment script. Most guys simply had the money set aside. Maybe there's an allocation to somebody back home — wife, girlfriend, family member — but you'd have a few dollars, military payment script because they tried to suck the dollars up. Gresham's law where dollars had real value and military payment script didn't. That's how you paid for things at the PX truck. The other thing that was a source of supplies was home. It's amazing how much stuff was brought out through the postal system.
- Mark: And you had no problem getting your mail or anything.
- Ficks: Mail delivery, except when you're on the move, was really very good. It was excellent. I received letters from family members and an occasional package but we had a couple of guys who'd get huge boxes stuffed with food. Large cans of Chef Boy Ardee ravioli. One fellow who was a Mexican national would get big care packages from mama with the fixins and he'd lay on a Mexican meal occasionally.
- Mark: You were well liked by everyone.
- Ficks: Whenever the fellow got a care package from mama back in Mexico, the chaplain would always show up and I don't think he was quite as interested in our spiritual needs as the chance for a meal that certainly transcended what was going to be in the company mess hall that night.
- Mark: Now, this early, did you hear things like AFN [American Forces Network] and the sort of popular cultural outlets?
- Ficks: Adrian Cronauer? Oh, yeah.
- Mark: You listened to him specifically.

Ficks: Oh, sure. “Good morning, Vietnam.” And while Robin Williams was wildly funny, that wasn’t Adrian Cronauer. Was the music generally as bland as they portrayed it? Not quite. And you didn’t listen to it all the time. Tried to get news broadcasts occasionally. They had another item which interestingly enough wasn’t featured in the movie but was very funny. It was called the “don buster dog of the day” and it was inevitably some almost self-parodyzing country and western song sung out of key by an artist you’d never heard of and that was one of the traditions of AFRTS. It was also sort of funny that in 1966, I think if you check it out, the most popular song that year was the “Ballad of the Green Barrette” which was not necessarily the favorite song of the Marines and one or two radios would come to a irate Marine taking it and throwing it out. “God damn it, I’m tired of that song.” As I said, this was back in the regimental headquarters, you got a tank sitting out there being useless. Picture of the main street. Two of our corpsmen, nattily attired. This was a visit from CBS News. This was about the time that Morley Schafer lost it when somebody started a hooch on fire on a patrol. This I regarded as just a wonderful example of the government and media in action. What we did was we staged a patrol for them. This was essentially an informational operation and there was no real objective. We were taking these guys out on patrol so they could get some good film for the folks back home.

Mark: Of guys walking around in the jungle or something like that.

Ficks: Yeah, some, I don’t know who that guy is, some B-team correspondent, the round-eye camera guy and slanty-eye sound guy. It’s almost something that would come out of a M\*A\*S\*H style Vietnam motion picture.

Mark: So, when it came to the way the war was on television back home at this time, I mean, I don’t suppose you had any inkling.

Ficks: No, I didn’t realize that it was, what was happening and how powerful that was until I was back in the States and back at my final duty assignment which was the Naval base at Charleston, South Carolina when we had an EM club and big color television set — it was big by the standards of 1966 — and here was the war on the television and watching the reaction of the people who were there and those of us who had been overseas, been to Vietnam, big news, big deal, we’re not going to watch it on television, I’ve been there. But the guys who were yet to go over, and I was among the first back, found it really quite interesting. Jeez, is that what it’s like? That’s not what it’s like, that’s television.

Mark: What was ...

[END OF TAPE, SIDE 1]

Ficks: ... really real, you know, convey a portion of the content, a portion of the message but not the totality. But I can see how it could be a very galvanizing and a very stunning thing to people who had not experienced anything like that, you know, since color television was coming on, and it lacked the content or the quality of the stuff that had come out of the Second World War. You watched "Why We Fight," some of the other really superb propaganda pieces, or "Victory at Sea," which is sort of a religious experience.

Mark: Very magisterial.

Ficks: Oh, it's incredible. It's fun. But here's this sort of raw material coming in from the field and I don't think the media at the time quite understood what they were offering the American public and you combine that with that idiotic body count mentality that was starting to come into play.

Mark: So, the Morley Schafer scene you mentioned, I've seen this and I suspect a lot of people have, too, that was inaccurate? And did that happen much in your time, anyway?

Ficks: As for burning down hooches?

Mark: Burning the village.

Ficks: If we could identify it as abandoned, we'd probably destroy it. For the simple reason that it could be used as a defensive position, it could be used in some manner that could be injurious to us.

Mark: To hide, storage for example.

Ficks: We would destroy certain things that we deemed to be dangerous or potentially dangerous to us. If someone was living there, I do not recall any situation where we burned someone's house down. But there were abandoned villages for one reason or another, yeah, we'd burn those down. That was our platoon leader standing between the sound tech and the camera man explaining the operation. His name was Woodward, a very bright guy.

Mark: Now, I'm noticing the uniforms that you're wearing at the time. There not the sort of jungle uniform that came out later.

Ficks: That's right. Before Robert McNamara arrived on the scene, a man for whom there's going to be a very special place in hell, each service had its own dungarees. Here we're engaging in some very fine points but this was the Marine Corps dungaree at the time. The buttons, it's a flap over fastener, flap over, flap over. These are obviously very worn because there would have been a USMC stencil there. You can see that there's a pencil pocket here.

Shortly after McNamara got in they standardized the khaki dungaree. They standardized the boot. He's got very old Marine Corps boots here.

Mark: These are like World War II style?

Ficks: Those are just post World War II. I've got a pair at home that I still wear when I go hunting that was World War II style, manufactured in 1951 and I purchased them at a Marine outfitters, come around with extra uniforms in 1956. They're still very wearable.

Mark: So, he's an officer talking to the press obviously, but that's the kind of thing you'd be fighting with, add some web (??) gear and a helmet. You didn't find that ...

Ficks: That's right. Here's the reporter. He's wearing the first generation of jungle utilities.

Mark: Right.

Ficks: Those were just being issued to us about half way through my tour.

Mark: So, the old style uniform, you didn't find them terribly cumbersome.

Ficks: I preferred them to the new. It was a heavier cotton and it tended to hold up better; it wouldn't tear. I think every pair of jungle utilities that I had would tear through here in the crotch or, didn't hold up as well as the cotton ones. I still have a jacket like this with my blues hanging in my closet.

Mark: I've seen some of the older Army uniforms and they're much heavier. They're also much tighter. But the Marine Corps uniform looks baggier.

Ficks: It's a little baggy. There was a style before that during the Korean War which had the herringbone pattern to it and then the metal buttons. That really was old Corps if you had a pair of those to wear. This is a town north of DaNang near the Song Kuwong (Se Kong ??) River and we'd gone up there to one of these hearts and minds numbers.

Mark: So this is like a medical ...

Ficks: Essentially just a touchy, touchy, feely, feely, we're the Marines, we're your friends. I think this was probably put on by one of the local political guys.

Mark: Yeah, I was going to ask, how ...

Ficks: How spontaneous was this?

- Mark: Political pressure [was] the term I was going to use. Was this or wasn't this?
- Ficks: I think this was a somewhat contrived event. Some of our guys managed to come up with a sound system and guitar.
- Mark: How often would these sorts of events occur?
- Ficks: This was the only one I was ever really a party to. There's the corpsman again, probably handing out aspirin or something like that. I'd really forgotten about this until we hit this. See, I'm smoking a pipe too. I'm right in step with things. This was an operation, that's an Amtrac. I'm half way up a hill. Iron Bridge Ridge is down in here. For some reason we're scampering around these hills. More amtracs.
- Mark: I think that's where we started.
- Ficks: I think you're right.
- Mark: Not donating them to the Veterans Museum. Maybe someday.
- Ficks: See how you catalogue this. Another Vietnamese hooch. Here we are on some sort of patrol. This was one of the little paths between villages.
- Mark: So, on these patrols, how often would you make contact? I mean, would there be patrols when you went out and found nothing and came back?
- Ficks: Oh, absolutely nothing. The majority of them were absolutely nothing. How often did we go out and find something? How often, let's put it this way. How often would we go out and somebody'd come back wounded? Maybe one in seven. Go out and get into a good rip-roaring fire fight? Maybe one in twenty. This was one of the things about my portion of the war was the classic example of long periods of tedium interrupted by fleeting moments of sheer terror. We did not encounter them. There's no reason for them to engage us. And here you are, you're a part-time VC, you believe in whether it's a civil war or you just don't want foreigners around your country and you've got squirreled away an old French LaBelle or you found something else by way of a small arm why in hell would you take a potshot at a Marine patrol in broad daylight? It's silly. It's insane because they're going to respond and if they really get pissed off at you, they might just call in airplanes. So you're much better off going out at night and laying booby-traps because if they manage to wing one of us with a booby-trap, that stops the patrol from the time the radio man notifies the company that there's a need for medivac until the copter's there it could be 45 minutes. Copter comes in.

That's what you want to do is inconvenience them, slow them down. Booby-traps a perfect way to do it.

Mark: So, in terms of making contact with the enemy, oft times there were booby-traps, and those instances where shots would be exchanged in some way. Who was doing the initiating? Did you fire on them or did they pick and choose the time?

Ficks: Sometimes they'd pick and choose. One day we were out on patrol and we came around one of these little raises in the rice paddy landscape and there's six VCs standing in the middle of the paddy talking.

Mark: So you caught them in that case.

Ficks: That was an interesting case of — I winged one; he got away. I was carrying the grenade launcher. We don't know if we got any of the others or not. It's amazing how poorly even Marines shoot in a combat situation. The aimed round was not in evidence that day. It had been a long time since anything had happened. I think there was a lot of "buck fever."

Mark: Now you had mentioned the body count.

Ficks: Uh hum. Was the body count fudged in the field?

Mark: First of all, was it in fact, as you often read, the gauge of success — yeah, was it fudged? How often was it?

Ficks: I'm inclined to think it was hideously fudged because this had been established as a goal, this was how we were measuring our success here, which is insanity. Gomanly (??) said, "We do not fight wars to build pyramids of skulls." Well, that was the sort of mentality that was represented by. You fight wars by destroying the enemy and occupying land. Well, we weren't doing that. And you do not necessarily have to destroy the enemy by killing him.

Mark: So, in this situation you just mentioned, what sort of a body count — this might not be your job but from your perspective, what sort of count would you report back? Would be reported back, I suppose.

Ficks: Well, we would go back and, say there was the platoon leader or the company commander say we got into a little bit of action, we'd say that we have no knowledge that we killed anyone. We think we got one. I think when my grenade rounds winged the guy we tried to pursue him into an abandoned village. That was broken off for several reasons. One, we were kind of undermanned. It was about a 12 man patrol. This was a larger area. In case

there were a lot of people there, a lot of VC. Four or five guys in a situation like this abandoned village could really exert a lot of control over a patrol. It would be an ambush setup. And we said we thought we winged one. What did the captain do with that information? Did he say, "Well, we think we got one?" And did it gradually get better and better? I don't know. I really don't know. And this was just a little bit before the body count became quite as significant as it was let's say '67, '68, '69.

- Mark: Now, one more combat question for now at least anyway. And that involves the involvement of higher-ups, commanders, in the field. Because you had access to helicopters and the literature you often read how the captain will be in a helicopter at this elevation, the major would be up at this elevation, and there's a lot of command and control problems involved with that. Now, again, you're early, but I'm interested in your recollections as a ...
- Ficks: When we operated as squads the squad leader was in charge. We had no problem in getting medivacs out and the radioman handled that. Getting other assets, if we needed them, could be more difficult. If we moved to the next level, perhaps a platoon operation, it would be the platoon leader and, again, there was really no other involvement outside. If you got to a company operation, I'm not sure who was involved in the command and control structure at that point. I was a squad leader or radio man or grenadier and didn't have any real interaction with people who were running the overall operation. Did I ever have a sense that there people above us in helicopters orchestrating it? No, no.
- Mark: And from an operational standpoint, it wasn't a problem for you.
- Ficks: No. We could, generally, if we had to, get the sort of support that we needed whether it was aircraft, artillery, sometimes naval guns. It was usually there. Maybe not as quick as you wanted it.
- Mark: Okay. And your perception and image of the Vietcong, their fighting capabilities, the way they fought the war.
- Ficks: Well, since we were dealing, generally, with the regulars you don't have much of an impression to the extent that they could do a pretty good booby-trap. To the extent that we occasionally engaged what appeared to be organized forces, I was not particularly impressed. Obviously, the events of the La Drang Valley got our attention with regard to the NVA and I certainly think that some of the elements that were encountered in Starlight were fairly effective fighting people. But on our level it was early on in the war, it was sort of the free lance VC, or a couple of the guys operating together and they elected not to engage us head-to-head but to use other means.

Mark: And in a combat situation would they, for example, be more likely to retreat?

Ficks: Shoot and run, shoot and run, harassment because there's really no way they could effectively neutralize us in a fire fight situation, small arm situation. Let's say even if they were one-on-one, they did not carry the amount of fire power that we did.

Mark: Okay. We can go on with some of these.

Ficks: That's the platoon commander giving some candy to kids. A little smutty diversion in the middle of the field. That's a view looking down on the amtracs. They got me there, I had to come the rest of the way myself. Another dazzling view of Southeast Asia looking down toward DaNang.

Mark: That's the South China Sea.

Ficks: Correct. Walking back. These are mostly old French military roads.

Mark: A lot of these shots, it seems almost arid. Not what you'd expect. You, of course, had the monsoon season.

Ficks: We had the monsoon season. This was later on in the season, things are a little dry. Being right along the ocean there you had these sand dunes that added to it. This was one of our more interesting events. Here we are all standing outside of our Amtrac. Here we are all formed up. This is a battalion operation. We're picking up garbage.

Mark: Whose garbage is it? Is it American garbage at least?

Ficks: Well, there could be some American garbage, there could be some Vietnamese garbage there.

Mark: Why are you picking this up?

Ficks: Because the battalion commander was a lunatic. His name was Clemens (sp??), his nickname was Sneakin' Deacon, and he had us do things like this. There was another time when a, one of these concrete Buddhist temples had been blown to smithereens and we policed that up. This was sort of his perception of winning the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese. The man was a menace.

Mark: Now, there's a World War II term "chicken shit."

Ficks: Yeah.



Mark: Is that a term that was used in Vietnam? Are you familiar with it?

Ficks: “Chicken shit’s” a fairly common term. Uh hum. That sort of refers to what happens back in the rear. There’s a whole slew of Marines who experienced the Vietnam War and didn’t experience the peacetime fleet Marine force and a number of fellows who came back and wound up at Marine barracks, which is sort of the Vatican of “chicken shit” if you will. Charleston, we had seven admirals on the base. It was L. Mendel River’s congressional district. He spent a lot of time looking very nice, and the petty stuff. It was quite a factor. At this time over in Vietnam things were pretty loose, pretty free, and in some ways it was a better environment. It was markedly different from the peacetime service. South China Sea in the background. We made this part of Vietnam free from garbage. You can see some naval vessels out there in the water. I think some guys took the Amtrac out and are using it as a diving platform. More village shots. I think we’re handing out C-rations there. There were some C-rations that were not particularly popular and we were more than happy — and there we are, using it as a diving platform — more than happy to share them with our local friends. This is when we were leaving Vietnam to go to Okinawa. We were being rotated out to, interestingly enough, get some training in jungle warfare.

Mark: So, you were going to Okinawa then going back?

Ficks: We sailed back to Okinawa, that’s correct, and then we stopped briefly at Subic Bay for a little while, and then back in country. This is the tail end of a typhoon. That is a landing ship tank that is showing a disgusting amount below the water line. This is Subic Bay. That’s the captain’s gig. This is with the Montrose or the McGoffin (sp??)? This is the McGoffin (sp??). Hanging out, cleaning rifles. Tug boat. This is the old west gate at Subic Bay which gives you a brief history of the facility going back to the time of the Spaniards. And there’s the gate. We didn’t get off the base. That’s an “Ard.” That’s a type of self-propelled dry dock. A couple of the guys. Just outside the gate is Poe City, along the Poe.

Mark: The infamous.

Ficks: I haven’t heard anybody say a whole lot nice about it. Landing craft. Mike (??) boat.

Mark: So it is odd that you’re going to Okinawa for training?

Ficks: Actually, we stopped, we went back up there for some training and then we got a period at Subic Bay for jungle training. It was really, essentially, one of these nonsensical events. The level of naval traffic at Subic Bay at the time

was incredible. The Enterprise had just been commissioned and she was there. Old destroyer. Look at the hull number on that thing. Is it six?

Mark: I can't see it.

Ficks: Leaving Subic Bay. That's off-loading equipment at night. That's one of those mules. Remember that little, small, 4-wheel drive platform? That's not a bad picture actually. A little Dante-esque. These are the accommodations in Okinawa. This was Camp Hanson I believe. One of the entertainment mechanisms or facilities in Okinawa.

Mark: So, after having been in the field for awhile, was it odd to go back to a ...

Ficks: It was great.

Mark: ... westernized place?

Ficks: It was great, it was fun. Okinawa was interesting because, as you know, that was the last great battle of the Second World War and there is a huge museum there with this enormous map and there's a presentation where they light the lights and [show you] the various lines of defense, and where the various events took place, and where General Buckner was killed, the suicide cliff area. And I got down to the cliffs. In fact, I took this picture the day I was heading down there on a rented motor scooter. Sort of captivated by Okinawa. It was an interesting place. And the funny little Japanese cars before the funny little Japanese cars invaded the United States. These funny little places. Relatively comfortable. This is in Naha, I believe, the capital. This is the museum. One of the large guns the Japanese used to defend the island, 150-millimeter. I was captivated by this construction job because that's all wood. Hardly OSHA standards. Another street scene in Okinawa. Another one. That was a restaurant. That's the only place I've ever played slot machines and I won. Club Orion. I'm not sure why I took the picture but you can see I'm in it.

Mark: You're in it.

Ficks: An alleyway. Orion Beer, fresh to you. Just another shot of the suburban area. Sort of this Bahaus (??) architecture. Gate to BC Street. That was one of the big entertainment areas. That's an indoor fish and grocery market.

Mark: So you got some time off duty, so to speak.

Ficks: Liberty was pretty good when we were in Okinawa. We were there for a couple of weeks training. You could probably get out every night.

- Mark: What sort of training were you doing?
- Ficks: A lot of obstacle course.
- Mark: Was it just conditioning?
- Ficks: It was mostly conditioning. One of the reasons they brought us back was that a lot of our equipment was pretty dilapidated, the M-14s and the side arms were all rusty, they were all sent out to be re-blued, everything was replaced or repaired. Beyond that if there was any grand reason for doing it, I don't know, I don't know. We did have a little bit of jungle-like training when we were in the Philippines but, this wasn't, I'm not exactly sure what they'd have trained us to do differently. We weren't working for Robert Thompson, fighting the CT in Malaya. We were doing special ops, we were doing special forces kinds of things but getting new equipment, getting us out of there, that was helpful.
- Mark: Did you use the M-14 all the time you were there?
- Ficks: Except when I was carrying the grenade launcher. We had one period of time when we had a solar weapon system with us for evaluation, which was a Marine Corps program, it was also a 223-caliber weapon. It was very good. It made, the light machine-gun configuration was superb and I didn't have any great problems with the M-14. Relatively reliable, much harder hitting than a 223, I think ultimately a more accurate weapon.
- Mark: Now the M-16 started to come in. Perhaps after you were gone.
- Ficks: Army was carrying 16s.
- Mark: And they weren't happy about them.
- Ficks: Well, for a whole bunch of reasons. A lot of money was spent to re-engineer them, the side bolt closure, there was some question about the type of powder used in them. I think they adjusted the cyclical rate of fire down. I had shot one before joining the service. I purchased the civilian model.
- Mark: The AR-16.
- Ficks: Yeah. Which was obviously not fully automatic. And I found it interesting but there were other weapons that I enjoyed shooting. I was something of a chore for the Marine Corps because I had been shooting before I joined the Corps and they had to re-teach me.
- Mark: The right way, the wrong way, the Marine way?

- Ficks: That's right. Well, they taught you a level of discipline and consistency that I didn't have. I was, a few 22 boxes on a weekend, maybe, back that many years ago you could drive 20 minutes outside of Milwaukee and just put up cans in a field and nobody said "boo."
- Mark: That's a housing complex now.
- Ficks: It's a housing complex now. Let's see where this gets us.
- Mark: Is this still Japan?
- Ficks: This is Okinawa which is now part of Japan. Here we are mounting out, fresh faces, new equipment. Here's a guy taking a picture. This was down at Red Beach where we were getting aboard our ship in Okinawa. Montrose, APA 10. That was my squad leader, a guy named Murphy from Maine, was a wonderful guy. He was a superb land navigator. When we were on Okinawa we had a train appreciation program, night navigation and our lieutenant was a guy named Roy Biggers. He couldn't read a map, and he was getting us lost except for Murphy, and Murphy would say, "Well, sir, I don't really think we're there. I've got a feeling we're here." "Oh, you think so Murphy? Okay."
- Mark: What were your impressions of the officers above you? And NCOs? In terms of their leadership capabilities and that sort of thing.
- Ficks: Let's go to the level of platoon sergeant rather than squad leader. The platoon sergeants I knew had all been career Marine Corps. As I said, a couple of them in Korea, a couple back as far as World War II. We had one platoon sergeant, Sowan Telamonet (sp??), who was a Samoan, an outstanding man, a really prime example of what a Marine staff NCO should be. The rest of them were really pretty good. There was only one who I thought was a menace and should probably be retired out. He'd just been in too long. He was, he had the thousand yard stare and was just getting his ticket punched to get out.
- Mark: He'd been in Vietnam too long.
- Ficks: He'd been in the service too long. He shouldn't have made this war. It wasn't his war. He didn't understand. He should have been back stateside. As far as the officers go, had a guy named Woodward, that was the gentleman in the pictures, very good leader, fellow from the East, not that much older than I was, finished college. He was about the only one that had any real sense of the history of Vietnam. He'd read a few books. He was aware — I'd read a few books, too — of the three Chinas, of not only the issues of how French colonialism worked on the Vietnamese but how their whole history had. And that was sort of interesting to chat with him. Had another officer, this Biggers

fellow, who was well-meaning but just naturally inept. He didn't get anybody killed but he could have. And my first platoon leader was a mustanger, he'd come up as enlisted man. He was crazy but he was a good leader. He would be the, of all of them, I think he would be the one I'd want to have around when the stuff really hit the fan.

Mark: Now, you were there for 13 months.

Ficks: Overseas.

Mark: The officers were in the field for less time is that correct?

Ficks: Correct, correct. In the case of my first, he was rotated out. He'd served his time in country, whether it was 6 months or 13 months I don't know. Biggers was promoted and moved someplace else. Then when we were operating the last few months in country we were, it was Lieutenant Kopka (sp??). He was still there when I left. He was a good officer, too.

Mark: Was that sort of rotation among the officers a problem? I imagine enlisted men were rotating, too.

Ficks: Well, they'd set up this whole procedure whereby we, you rotated in and out. You didn't serve as a unit, which obviously had, I think, a profound impact on unit cohesion.

Mark: That's what I'm trying to get at, and your recollection on that and your reflections on that.

Ficks: Did it make us a poor fighting force? I think for the intensity and the nature of the conflict that we were in, it probably didn't. I think if you're looking at a more intense situation along the lines of what developed later and what was developing in other parts of the country when I was there, it probably would have had a detrimental effect. As far as the officers, again it depends on how closely you're working with them. So much of what we did was on the squad level that regular daily interaction with your platoon leader was not an issue.

Mark: So, had they developed terms like the FNG by this time, for example? Are you familiar with that term?

Ficks: No.

Mark: An FNG is a "friggin' new guy" and this was a guy would come in, they'd have to integrate him into the fighting.

Ficks: We were having new guys come in, oh, probably my last three months there and didn't call them that, didn't have a whole lot to do with them. One sort of amusing story. I was asleep one night in a tapioca field and one of the new guys, it was my turn for watch, came along and shook my on my shoulder and the next thing he knew he was looking down the barrel of a 45. You woke me by tapping the bottom of my feet. So there was some protocols that ... . Actually, we were happy to see the new guys. We were going to go home.

Mark: Yeah.

Ficks: You started "I'm getting short." "How short are you?" I'm sleeping under a rifle cleaning batch.

Mark: So, as you're getting shorter are you more or less likely to fight or did it make a difference?

Ficks: That Mexican fella, kid I mentioned to you who got the food from his mommy, he joined the Marine Corps to jump ahead in line as far as the citizenship game went. The day that shape charge went off, he was killed. He should have been pulled out of the field three days earlier but some Remington Raider screwed up. Sort of a tragic little vignette isn't it? It really is. Did my attitude change any as I was getting near time for rotation? — and normally you were pulled out three or four days before it's time to go back. I don't think I can honestly answer that question in terms of the space of time between then and now. I don't think I shirked, I don't think I tried to get out of any patrols. Being one of the two radio operators we had, you were hoping that things went well. I guess it's the best way I can describe it.

Mark: That's interesting.

Ficks: So that's Sergeant Murphy who went back to Maine to live in the woods.

Mark: There's lots of them.

Ficks: This is Subic Bay where we all lined up. This is a place called Andersonville, probably for good reason. That was, oh, golly, what was he? I think he was one of the other grenadiers. That is a view from Andersonville down the main side of Subic Bay. You can figure out what that is, Navy's answer to Marine Corps hygiene. This is where we, we were here for about a week or so.

Mark: This is the Philippines.

Ficks: It's the Philippines. Essentially wandering around friendly jungles. The rifle rack on the ship. This is when we were on a, this is a sequence when a destroyer came next to us. Let's see, yeah, that's a line thrower, firing a line

over to the destroyer. It's hull number 135. She was in the Second World War. We're not noticing any swell at all. The destroyer is just all over the place. Back in country. That was Hill 92. That was a wonderful place to be. Heading out of the main compound, the main company area. At this point our company, gulf company, was here where we had two platoons, another platoon was further south on this little pimple of land and then our platoon was up on this hill. These are some views from it. But it was ... excuse me?

Mark: I see some burned out areas there.

Ficks: Yeah, diesel fuel. This is from the top of the hill looking down. We defoliated it, put in tactical wire, attached various tin cans to it, threw your beer bottles down there. Agent Orange was not around when I was in Vietnam. If we wanted — that was during a rain storm, one of the bunkers, sun's out — we'd get diesel fuel and spread it around and light it. You can see the low clouds in the valley out there. That's looking back toward DaNang. This pass would lead you into DaNang. I think we were about 17 miles out. I sure got carried away with this sequence. I think there's a rainbow in there. Talk about needing a good editor. This is also about the time that the camera was starting to act up. A little Marine Corps nonsense. This is a fellow named Watson. I think he was one of the few war lovers that I knew. He would take booby-traps apart. Inside one of the bunkers. One of the hooches.

Mark: That's typical [unintelligible] living conditions.

Ficks: Yes, yes. Actually it wasn't bad. Those little bamboo mattresses or frames could be made up by the locals for a couple of bucks and you'd put an air mattress on it. That was one of the bunkers in progress. By the time we finished it there was another two layers of sandbags across the top. That's a helicopter being returned by another helicopter.

Mark: That's odd. I've never seen this before.

Ficks: That was since some moisture got into the camera. That was after I tumbled down the hill. That's when we were leaving Hill 92. This is, that's the distance. This is my last position in Vietnam which was farther out in the boondocks.

Mark: That's you?

Ficks: No. That is one of the, a guy named Terry something from California, who's dressed up, pretending he's our platoon leader. The platoon leader effected a neckerchief and a shoulder holster and this was just an incredible put-on he was doing. That's a flame tank cleaning out underbrush around our new

position, opening up fields with fire. You just feel the heat coming in from there, with the napalm and suddenly dry vegetation. This is the view from our bunker. You can see it's a new bunker because you see the integrity of the sandbags. And that's looking out in the general direction of the west of Southeast Asia. I'm getting short, I'm starting to compose artsy pictures. M-14 and I had the bipod on mine when I carried one. The other's a grenade launcher. The 45 which is glowing because essentially no bluing left on it. And then the ammunition for them. That's sort of an amusing picture looking down the barrel. Coming back from Indian country. I guess that's it.

Mark: Okay. There's a little bit of time left.

Ficks: Okay. Go ahead.

Mark: I just want to ask you about Operation Starlight. I don't think you mentioned it in any of these photographs and I'm wondering if I missed it.

Ficks: I did not have my camera with me.

Mark: It sounds like the biggest sustained operation you were on.

Ficks: Uh, Double Eagle. Starlight, as I said, was down around Chu Lai. We flew down there on C-130s, a very short hop, and at one point took up a position along the main road and the railroad track guarding two 106s, for which we had no ammunition, and then we were up in the hills for a couple of nights and on one of those patrols we were set in along the side of a trail and thought we might execute an ambush and we decided not to and the force that walked past us was numerically superior which was good that we didn't do it. And we didn't have a full sense of the importance of the scope of Starlight until we were back up in DaNang and were getting information, let's see, through the grape vine and through the Stars and Stripes.

Mark: And what was it? I'm not familiar with it.

Ficks: It was a large operation, really the first time the Marines, as I understand it, encountered the NVA. There was some fairly serious fighting going on. Chu Lai was an airfield, really nothing had been there until they went down and set up this facility and for some reason it was being contested by the NVA. The other big op I was on was Double Eagle which was involving the Army and the Marine Corps and that was well south of Chu Lai. We basically went in and sat on top of a hill, did a couple of helicopter assaults off the LPH, Valley Forge. In fact, one of the times I came closest to buying it was coming back aboard the Valley Forge. We hit a pocket of air and, we're looking out and seeing the side of the ship. Ply that throttle.



- Mark: Now, did these larger operations seem to have the sort of senselessness, I guess that's the word, that the search and destroy missions had or were they different?
- Ficks: It's kind of hard to judge from the level of an infantryman. You're not exactly sure where you're fitting into the scheme of things. Was there a specific objective in Double Eagle? I think there was. I don't know if it was really accomplished. We spent a portion of it sitting on a hillside and watching mass numbers of air cavalry helicopters move up this valley. As I understand the thought, they were to serve as a piston pushing the bad guys toward us. Well, it didn't really happen. We had some fire fights. We lost one guy to small arms fire, the only one that we really did. From my perspective, I did not see it as a tremendous victory.
- Mark: Uhm, okay, so I suppose for the rest of this we can talk about some of the post-war readjustments issues.
- Ficks: Sure, uh hum.
- Mark: Do you recall when you got home after your 13 months abroad, describe your voyage back.
- Ficks: Flew back, flew out of country to Okinawa for about two, three days where they had a number of shake downs to see if you were leaving with anything you shouldn't.
- Mark: What were they looking for?
- Ficks: Primarily weapons and ammunition. Did they find any? We had one fellow who turned his sea bag over and there was a big cardboard tube in it that had a 105 round in it and when asked what the hell he was going to do with it he said, "Well, I want to turn it into a lamp." It was so improbable it was probably the truth. And from there we boarded commercial, we flew commercial from DaNang to Okinawa, and then Okinawa, Tokyo, and then jumped to El Toro (??) Marine air facility in California. And this was the time that the airline strike was starting to take hold and we had the opportunity of trying to find military connections that would get us home or try our luck at Los Angeles International. I opted to do that and I got the last American Air Lines plane off the coast before they shut it down. And it was sort of interesting because we were wearing summer service, tropical, short sleeves, khakis. No one really had any decorations. You had your rank insignia on. We were all brown as berries, thin as rails and suddenly we go from Southeast Asia and the military to Los Angeles International and all of these really strange people called "civilians" and we weren't sure what they were and they were damned if they knew who we were. I wouldn't call the situation hostile,

but there was a strange tension in the air that was palpable. Flew home, got a connection from Chicago to Milwaukee, had 30 days leave, a number of my other friends were home. This was the summer time, college.

Mark: This was the summer of '66?

Ficks: '66, the summer of '66. And at that time there was no real hostility or ill feelings towards me. It was a very nice leave at home. My orders were to Charleston, South Carolina. Got down there and had two really interesting and good years. And, again, Charleston being that military you were sort of isolated from the attitudes or the trends that were developing in certain parts of the country.

Mark: But you did observe them I'm sure.

Ficks: You could observe them.

Mark: And as the war dragged on and as the country became divided over it, as someone who had been there, I'd be interested in your observations.

Ficks: I was very distressed with the way it was being pursued, on a number of levels. And maybe some of the thoughts were laid out and embellished by the passage of time, but certainly on the first level was the incredible waste of American fighting men because we weren't seeing an end to it. These guys were simply being used up because of bad political and bad military decisions. And you could also see it was going to have a tremendously harmful effect on the US military, as an organization.

Mark: In terms of morale?

Ficks: In terms of morale, in terms of merely its ability to function. You had a lot of people who were just getting their tickets stamped as far as careers go, it wasn't easy to make a name for yourself or be successful in the conventional fighting man sense. It was just an incredible dead end no matter how you looked at it. The fact that they were being led by such incredibly poor civilian leadership was no doubt a factor. There was tremendous room and need for reform in the military following Korea, the '50s, into the '60s and it wasn't taking place. It was being skewed by being bogged down in this no-win war in Southeast Asia. And even Nixon's arrival on the scene wasn't particularly helpful, ultimately, because all he was trying to do was to broker a way out of it. No one ever made the, came up to say we will win this or we will simply leave now. They constructed this artifice to get us out of there. You could see it being very divisive within the civilian community although at no point, I think, I'm not sure what the actual statistics were, it continued to be something that I would say was popular, was approved of, by a large portion of the

population if not, in fact, in theory. When I got back to college there were an awful lot of kids who were reacting to it in a very hostile manner, with only limited knowledge of what they were so angry about.

Mark: Now, where did you go to, where did you finish your school?

Ficks: I finished at Milton College.

Mark: Not exactly a hot bed of protests as far as I know. Were there typical ...

Ficks: Well, there were. Why did I opt for a small school in a small town? I didn't like big schools, I'd been to one of them. I was a little bit, or a lot, older than my contemporaries and it provided what I thought was the appropriate environment and ambiance to finish up my college work which took some time because I took some time off for jobs to refill the larder then went back to school. There were people that were protesting the war. There were some who were massively ambivalent. It was amazing how many of the kids who were hostile to it were just parroting somebody else's thoughts and hadn't thought about it a lot, they didn't understand all the issues that were surrounding it, the history involved in it, and it was easy for them to be angry because things continued to be handled in such a bizarre manner. And there's an existential quality to the whole thing. Maybe you could say from the time I was there but certainly after Tet which people refused to view as an American victory in the military sense it was. It was not perceived that way at the time. There's this one story about an American military man, I forget who it is, who after the war met an opposite member of the North Vietnamese and he says to them, "You know, you never beat us in a major military action. And if the truth be known I think there was never American military defeat above squad level." And the Vietnamese said, "My friend, that's irrelevant." So, I went back to school and finished up.

Mark: So, I'm interested in campus life. As a veteran were you a strange animal or were there other vets?

Ficks: There were other veterans on the campus.

Mark: Did you know them? Did you socialize with them?

Ficks: Oh, yeah. We had a vets club. I think we had, this was a school with what, 400, 500 students. It was very small. So there was about 15 or 20 of us on campus and I wouldn't say it was a tightly knit bunch but we were there and we were sort of a voice in various classes.

Mark: And what was the voice? What was the voice saying?

- Ficks: When young people were saying really stupid things, we'd say, "You're not quite right about that" and "We're not all out killing civilians and murdering babies" and "Maybe Jane Fonda should have been spanked."
- Mark: Now, I've talked to Vietnam vets and I'm amazed at the different ways they perceived their own conflict. There was the Vietnam Vets Against the War sort of movement. There was the other side. Even in your small group of veterans, were there divisions? And did you talk about what had happened over there?
- Ficks: There wasn't a lot of talk about it. Merely to a man they were business majors.
- Mark: Not from us radicals, group I can think of off hand.
- Ficks: No, they weren't really interested in a whole lot of introspection. I had a couple of friends who came back from the service who were hostile to the war, for whom they were changed by the war. Are they non-functioning now? No. But it had a much stronger effect on them than the war had on me.
- Mark: And they served how much later than you?
- Ficks: Only incrementally afterwards and neither one was infantry. One was communications. Of course the idea of spending 13 months in a com bunker reading girlie magazines and listening to your headset hiss would send anybody over the line. And another friend was in motor transport and he was really quite bitter for a number of years after the war, just about things in general.
- Mark: Now, on a small campus I would imagine those of you who were vets, I mean, other people knew about it. Was there a problem?
- Ficks: No, no.
- Mark: There was no spitting on vets.
- Ficks: No spitting on vets, things were generally fairly cordial. There were a couple of duty Bolsheviks who were a little strident in class debate or let's say, at the student union. But, no, there was no overt behavior.
- Mark: So, you majored in business.
- Ficks: No, I was history and English literature. I was one of the exceptions.
- Mark: Two great fields.

- Ficks: Yes, I know.
- Mark: I'm interested in employment issues after the war. You'd think after the World War I and World War II experience Vietnam's a little bit different. But in terms of going to college and finding work, did you have any sort of economic dislocation as a result of the war?
- Ficks: Well, as I mentioned I did spend some time extending my college career to get some interim employment. Sold cars one summer, I was a private investigator for a period of time, finally graduate and start looking around for employment, and I eventually wound up in retail management for a number of years. Do I think I was ever denied a fair hearing because I was a Vietnam War veteran? I don't know. I do know that there were some interview situations where I had the sense I was being regarded with a somewhat higher degree of curiosity than I had expected. Oh, you were in the military. Oh, you were a Marine. Yeah, what's it to you?
- Mark: Oh, and I wanted to go back about the GI Bill and discuss it with you before the tape started rolling.
- Ficks: Yes.
- Mark: In terms of how effective was it in helping you and do you think you would have gone back to school had it not been for the GI Bill?
- Ficks: Oh, I'd have gone back to school. Again, the amount of money, it was a stipend, it was not significant in the terms of my economic wellbeing on campus. I'd have to go back and look at my banking records to see how much it was but it was, in terms of the costs of going to college, i.e., tuition, books, accommodations, eating, and miscellaneous expenses, really insignificant amount.
- Mark: How much time we've got left here. A couple of other things. In the public mind, Vietnam veterans and sort of psychological traumas of war are often linked. I'm interested in any, did you have any sort of emotional things to have to deal with. Can't think of a better term.
- Ficks: Qualified, no. We do have this tremendous industry of dependence in this country and a tremendous tolerance for people who were not willing to try and work things out for themselves. That being said, I do have nightmares. Flashbacks? No.
- Mark: Did you at the time?

Ficks: No.

Mark: When you got back?

Ficks: No, and I've not spent a great deal of time pondering why someone was killed and I was not killed. I've thought about war a little bit more lately as I've gone over my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday and as it sort of recedes into history. We're talking about the age of the Second World War veterans. Well, I'm on the edge for Vietnam veterans and I've crossed the half century mark and I'm thinking about it as how will it ultimately be treated, what will the ultimate effects on this conflict be with regard to this country. I've always been thankful that I was spared physical injury and that I got through with my life. And occasionally I'll think about somebody I knew and wonder where they are today. My friend, the war-lover. Occasionally a thought about some of the guys that were wounded or killed.

Mark: But you haven't been to any reunions or anything.

Ficks: Well, it's hard having reunions that trans-placement through that turnover. I am involved with a couple of veterans organizations. I was briefly a member of the American Legion. I keep looking to see if there are going to be reunions of my unit. I haven't seen one track through either the Marine Corps Gazette or the Marine Corps Historical Society but there are more starting to bubble up. Second Battalion, there's a First Battalion, Third Marines had one. Well, I was Two, Third so I'm waiting to see if one of those is going to come along. It's a little bit difficult in terms of the cohesiveness of the organizations. You see lots of ship reunions but not many Vietnam unit reunions. I could go off to a Third Marine Division reunion and that might be kind of fun but would I go to one for the Second Battalion, Third Marines? Yeah, I probably would. It would be sort of interesting.

Mark: In what way?

Ficks: Well, to see if I can identify anybody, see how much we've all changed with the passage of time, because I think when you look at the veterans as a body, as a group, you're probably not going to find them a lot different from any other like sampling. You're going to have some people who've been very successful, who've made a lot of money, who have rewarding careers in some area or another, you've had some that have made mistakes, who've been failures, who've had problems. How much of any of that is due to the war in Vietnam? Is it going to make, alter the statistical reality? I don't know. Interesting to find out.

Mark: That's about it. Is there anything you'd like to add? Anything you think we've skipped over, glossed over?

Ficks: Well, probably something will flash to me by the time I reach home. You know, what? Watertown or something like that, Mark.

Mark: Okay, well, thanks for coming in.

Ficks: I enjoyed it.

Mark: Very, very interesting. And great pictures.

**[End of Interview]**