

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an

Oral History Interview with

JOSEPH M. FLEMING

Military Intelligence, Army, Cold War and Vietnam War
Military Intelligence, Army Reserves.

2001

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Fleming, Joseph M., (1945-). Oral History Interview, 2001.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 59 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 59 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Video Recording: 1 videorecording (ca. 59 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Military Papers: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Joseph M. Fleming, a Burlington, Iowa native, discusses his Vietnam War service with the 66th Military Intelligence Group in Germany, as a captain working with ARVN leaders in Vietnam, and as a career officer in the Army Reserves. Fleming touches on working at the Iowa Army Ammunition Plant, working on his bachelor's degree in chemistry at the University of Iowa, and enlisting in the Army Chemical Corps. He talks about basic training at Fort Bliss (Texas), chemical warfare school at Fort McClellan (Alabama), and attending Engineer Officer Candidate School at Fort Belvoir (Virginia). Fleming discusses getting married ten days before entering basic training and mentions the chemicals, equipment, and explosives he trained with. Assigned to military intelligence, he talks about German language training in Arlington (Virginia) and military intelligence training at Fort McClellan. Fleming describes his duties with the 66th Military Intelligence Group in Munich (Germany), including analyzing written material as well as interrogating East German refugees. He discusses relations with the West Germans and family life on a military base. Transferred to Vietnam, Fleming touches on brief Vietnamese language training and his promotion to captain. Based in Vinh Long, he talks about working with Army of the Republic of Vietnam troops, "firefly" missions monitoring airfields in the Delta region from a helicopter, and overseeing six district intelligence teams. He touches upon his work with the Phoenix program targeting Viet Cong infrastructure. He recalls having an R&R when he got to celebrate New Year's Eve and New Year's Day in both Saigon and Hawaii. Fleming touches upon riding in helicopters under ground fire, directing medevacs of wounded intelligence team members, living on the Vietnamese economy, and returning home. Put in charge of the Madison Military Intelligence Resident Office (Wisconsin), Fleming discusses monitoring the anti-war movement, running background investigations on individuals, and helping the different military branches consolidate into the Defense Investigative Service. He touches on his divorce and remarriage. He talks about joining the American Legion and VFW, attending reunions, and his tactical intelligence activity in the Army Reserves, including being stationed with the 247th Military Intelligence Detachment at Fort McCoy (Wisconsin) and the 88th Army Reserve Command (Minnesota). Fleming mentions being the chief of intelligence and security for the Army Reserve Command, which was responsible for Minnesota, Iowa, and Wisconsin. He states his last assignment was serving as deputy commandant to the intelligence school at Fort McCoy.

Biographical Sketch:

Fleming (b.1945) enlisted in the Army in 1967, was on active duty until 1973, and was in the Army Reserves until 1997. He graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and settled in Madison.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 2001.
Transcribed by Michael Kerins, 2010.
Corrected by Channing Welch, 2010.
Corrections typed in by Michelle Marion, 2010.
Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2011.

Interview Transcript:

Jim: You comfortable there?

Joe: Yeah, I'm fine.

Jim: Okay. We're up and running here.

Joe: Okay, sir.

Jim: Talking to Joseph Fleming, and the date is 7 December, 2001.
Where were you born, sir?

Joe: I was born in Burlington, Iowa, down in the southeast corner of the state.

Jim: And when was that?

Joe: December 25th, 1945.

Jim: And when did you enter military service?

Joe: 1967.

Jim: Drafted, volunteered—what?

Joe: No, I volunteered.

Jim: For what service?

Joe: Well, the United States Army.

Jim: Army. Volunteered U-S-A.

Joe: Mm-hmm.

Jim: Did you learn—gonna to be drafted? Was that—

Joe: There was certainly indications along that line, yes.

Jim: I'm trying to discern what prompted you to volunteer.

Joe: Well, I had been going to school, but then I got a job with the Iowa Army Ammunition Plant. Because I was no longer in school I didn't have my student deferment, and certainly the draft was looking like it wouldn't [?] potentially pick me up. So, yes, I volunteered for the Army because I thought the Army would be best suited for my—

Jim: Interests?

Joe: Aspirations and interests, yes. And therefore I enlisted in an area in which I had hoped to gain further experience in.

Jim: Which was?

Joe: Chemical Corps.

Jim: You were in university in Iowa somewhere, or—

Joe: University of Iowa, yeah.

Jim: You were in chemistry or something like this?

Joe: Yes. I have an associate's degree in chemistry.

Jim: But you hadn't completed it then, though?

Joe: Well, I had completed my associate's degree, but I was taking further courses—

Jim: Toward a master's?

Joe: Well, no. Towards my bachelor's.

Jim: Oh, I see. You were halfway through there.

Joe: Yes.

Jim: Yeah, okay. And when you volunteered for the Army, did they promise you anything? You told 'em, "I'm interested in this," and because the stories are almost universally the same. But I won't spoil your story, so you tell me how that went.

Joe: Well, I--yes, I signed up on what they'd call a Delay Entry Program. And it was to guarantee me the right to go through Chemical Corps training and being assigned an MOS [Military Occupational Specialty] within the Chemical Corps area.

Jim: The fella at the recruiting center promised you this, right?

Joe: Yes, sir. And they delivered, believe it or not.

Jim: Oh, they did?

- Joe: Yes, they did!
- Jim: Oh, that's not the usual story.
- Joe: Yeah.
- Jim: 'Cause the usual story is that they go from great lengths in telling 'em how it's gonna be, and then they end up in the infantry [laughs].
- Joe: Well, fortunately for me they did deliver. I went to basic training at Fort Bliss, Texas down at El Paso.
- Jim: The "Garden Spot."
- Joe: The "Garden Spot," yeah. It was kind of experiencing going out to the weapons range, though, and having snow in the sandy foxholes.
- Jim: Hey, well, that's something different.
- Joe: It was.
- Jim: The natives must have gone crazy seeing snow.
- Joe: Well, as a follow-up I went back to El Paso many years later while I was still in the military, and I drove in to El Paso when they had just had an inch of snow, and I was about the only vehicle that was working [Jim laughs]. 'Cause I had snow tires from up north.
- Jim: Right, right. And they don't know anything about snow.
- Joe: They sure don't.
- Jim: Right. So, how was your basic? Was it instructive, or just boring?
- Joe: Well, I think it was instructive. I had the opportunity to be an acting squad leader most of the time when I was in basic. And the same one I was in advanced individual training. I was in leadership roles, and for that reason I think it was more of a challenge.
- Jim: Oh, sure.
- Joe: There was also some people that were in basic training and had a hard time with English. So, some of the cadre that were training us expected me to help them along a little bit because I could speak a little Spanish. And consequently it was expected of me.

- Jim: Oh, I see. Very good. And from basic, you went where?
- Joe: From basic I went to Fort McClellan, Alabama, as a matter of fact. The home of the Chemical Corps.
- Jim: Oh, yeah. I didn't know that [external noise in background]. The Chemical Corps is based in Alabama? For the Army, right?
- Joe: It was at that time. Yes.
- Jim: Big base?
- Joe: No, actually quite small. It's where the Women ['s] Army Corps was trained. And also—
- Jim: You mean that's where their basic was?
- Joe: Yes. And some military police were stationed out of there.
- Jim: Now, I don't know about what chemical training is involved. Is that classroom material primarily, or were you out blowing up things, or—
- Joe: No, it was a lot of field work in addition to the classroom instruction. Got exposure to chemical agents, most of the—
- Jim: Offensive or defensive or both?
- Joe: Yes [laughs].
- Jim: All of that?
- Joe: All of the above. We also got exposure to a lot of the weapons used, such as napalm and the flamethrower. Things that could be utilized in the Army inventory.
- Jim: Napalm is—and then the flamethrowers, is that the napalm they drop from planes and the flamethrower material the same?
- Joe: You know, I honestly can't remember at this point. So, I know we've had the instruction on different days, but I never thought to do the chemical analysis of the materials.
- Jim: I was gonna say, it seems like the same, but on the other hand—
- Joe: It conceivably could be, yeah. I think the material that we used in the flamethrower was perhaps more—

Jim: Liquid, but probably [unintelligible]—

Joe: More of a liquid consistency, whereas napalm is more of a gel.

Jim: Gel, yeah.

Joe: Yeah.

Jim: And you learn how to put on and take off those suits that I saw in Desert Storm?

Joe: Well—

Jim: Those looked really and truly uncomfortable.

Joe: I think they are [Jim laughs]. I have had those suits on, but you have to understand that when I went through Chemical Corps training we didn't have those suits yet.

Jim: Oh, oh! I didn't realize they were that new.

Joe: Yeah, they were relatively more modern than what I was when I went through the Chemical Corps training.

Jim: So, was it important that they taught you the chemical composition of all these materials?

Joe: I don't think so at that point. No.

Jim: Nothing that would interfere with—

Joe: No.

Jim: Help you do whatever they wanted you to do.

Joe: No, no.

Jim: So, what would a chemical guy—what would be an average assignment for a man trained like this?

Joe: Well, I was stationed—or supposed to be stationed, let's put it that way. I was supposed to go to Aberdeen Proving Ground [Maryland] after I was finished with my training. And that assignment was effectively altered by my selection for Officer Candidate School. So instead of going on as an enlisted soldier, I immediately became an OCS candidate and went to Fort Belvoir at Virginia.

- Jim: Did you have to sign up as a regular?
- Joe: Yes.
- Jim: I was wondering whether that. After you finished that OCS course, if you wanted to stay in, before you got in there, you had to sign something saying that you're not gonna run off home?
- Joe: That's correct. I essentially signed a—
- Jim: Are we talking about a four year or six year or—
- Joe: Well, it was “voluntary indefinite” is the nomenclature that they used. So they had me forever.
- Jim: Well, that was a hell of a decision for you to make ‘cause this is-- all of a sudden you've got a career when you didn't plan to have a career.
- Joe: Well, it was certainly a major decision in my life.
- Jim: Were you married at that time?
- Joe: Yes, I was. In fact I got married—
- Jim: That made it a little tougher, didn't it.
- Joe: I got married ten days before I left for basic training, as a matter of fact. So—
- Jim: Yeah. Well, those were difficult times for you.
- Joe: Absolutely.
- Jim: Well, your wife must be [laughs] very tolerant. I'm sure she wasn't thrilled with that decision. I just know that [laughs]!
- Joe: Well, actually, my second wife is more tolerant than my first. Let's put it that way.
- Jim: Okay. Well, anyway, that was a big change in your life.
- Joe: Yes, indeed.
- Jim: Gettin' married and then the next thing you know you're attached—you got married again—to the US Army.
- Joe: Yeah, that's very true.

- Jim: Okay, now goin' to OCS. Now you got away from the chemicals. Now they train you how to lead men and do all those Army type things.
- Joe: Yes. It was Engineer Officer Candidate School, actually. So we got exposed to a lot of the engineer type equipment and bridge building, etcetera. It was a different atmosphere and—
- Jim: How did you enjoy that?
- Joe: I did, yeah. So much of it was classroom activity, however, though—
- Jim: Learning about stress with materials and so forth?
- Joe: Well, somewhat. But I think we got exposed to a lot of the engineer equipment that was being used to include explosives. From that standpoint, my experience from—
- Jim: I was gonna say, that added to your background.
- Joe: It certainly was a key interest to me. And I followed up on that later.
- Jim: Mm-hmm, okay. So, you became an expert on explosives?
- Joe: Well, I won't call myself an expert by any stroke of the imagination. But I enjoyed Officer Candidate School, and I graduated from there and got an assignment to—a select assignment, I might add—in military intelligence.
- Jim: Before we leave the explosives, I have to pick your brain a little more. A lot of these guys that I've interviewed talk about different types of explosives like C4 [a plastic explosive]. Is that a new explosive, or is that something that was around for many, many years?
- Joe: It's been around for quite a while.
- Jim: Now, how is that different from TNT?
- Joe: Well, C4 is—
- Jim: It still had to be ignited with a—
- Joe: It still requires a primer.
- Jim: Primer, right. That's the word I was looking for.

- Joe: Actually, you can use C4 to—just light it, and it'll burn and warm up rations and coffee and things of this nature out in the field.
- Jim: If it's not contained, it won't explode?
- Joe: If it's not contained, it won't explode.
- Jim: [External noise in background] See, if didn't stop ya--I didn't know that. Now, these shoe mines that these guys got their foot blown off with--was that C4 the Germans put in those things? Or something very similar?
- Joe: I don't know that I can even answer that.
- Jim: Well, they said a quarter pound of—maybe they meant TNT rather than C4.
- Joe: Well, I know whether explosives were used in some of the foot mines because I did chemical analysis on such mines when I was with the Iowa Army Ammunition Plant. And at that time they were classified, so I don't know what remains classified to this date or not.
- Jim: Hmm. Excuse me. A hand grenade, what is that? What's the explosive in a hand grenade? Is it dynamite, or--
- Joe: No, that's a little different explosive. I don't know precisely the main ingredient. I was working with the primers in the hand grenades—the delay composition. And we did analysis on those.
- Jim: Well, what sets off a hand grenade?
- Joe: Well, it's got a little primer in it.
- Jim: Right, so it is a primer. So when you pull the pin out it drives into the inward towards the explosive I assume.
- Joe: Yes.
- Jim: Well, those've been around. I guess those really haven't changed a great deal in—
- Joe: Well, the sophistication of them has changed a great deal.
- Jim: Oh, it has?
- Joe: Yeah.
- Jim: You mean more powerful I suppose?

Joe: I don't know that I would say more powerful, but more contained. The type of explosion that you will achieve is utilizing in a certain type of hand grenade is different from one that might be intended for equipment as opposed to personnel.

Jim: Anti-personnel, yeah.

Joe: Yeah, so—

Jim: Okay. Well, now I see I've learned somethin'. All right, at school there, you enjoyed your time in OCS, you said.

Joe: Yes, sir.

Jim: That was three months?

Joe: No. Let's see, that was six months.

Jim: Six months. Oh, you really got extensive. In earlier wars, you know, the three month was normally the—was standard. Three month for OCS. Okay, now you've acquired all this knowledge and talent, where did they put you to work?

Joe: And became a second lieutenant. I got my first assignment in military intelligence which was to go to school.

Jim: [laughs] Back to school!

Joe: Yeah.

Jim: Gosh!

Joe: And here I went to—actually, it was downtown Arlington, Virginia. And I was going to a private institution learning German language training.

Jim: Ah, now, was this a request, or was this just an assignment?

Joe: This was an assignment.

Jim: You didn't—

Joe: It was also—I volunteered “indefinite” out of Officer Candidate School, and they gave me military intelligence branch which included an assignment going to Germany, and prior to going to Germany—

Jim: You got several options [coughs]. You got several options, and you chose this one, you mean?

Joe: Yes. And actually I was selected after requesting it, but it was kind of a dream assignment, and--

Jim: Oh, really?

Joe: And I got selected, so ya know—

Jim: Well, that shows you have talent, you see. Obviously you impressed ‘em.

Joe: I was very pleased.

Jim: Well, I guess so. Now, intelligence and going to Germany--so does this involve learning language?

Joe: Yes.

Jim: Besides English?

Joe: Yes. I learned German before I went overseas. And when I was assigned to Germany, I was assigned to the 66th Military Intelligence Group out of Munich, Germany.

Jim: 66th, just plain--

Joe: 66th. MI Group. But my assignment was actually general collection in military intelligence.

Jim: In what year was that, sir?

Joe: Oh, would be [?]-goodness.

Jim: Would it be '68, '69?

Joe: Ah, '69? Yes. And prior to going to Germany, actually, I also got some military intelligence training before I went over there.

Jim: To read?

Joe: No, it's like when I was stationed at Fort McClellan. I got advanced individual training. This was giving me individual training for an officer in a specific military occupational specialty. Which was intelligence staff analysis.

Jim: Ah, right. Now, we're getting' down--you were analyzing written material?

Joe: Yes.

Jim: Or intercepted radio communications?

Joe: More analyzing written material as well as analyzing information gained from refugees coming from behind the—

Jim: Iron Curtain?

Joe: Iron Curtain, yes.

Jim: You were fighting the Cold War!

Joe: Absolutely.

Jim: Right there on the front lines, boy! [laughs].

Joe: Absolutely. In conjunction with the Germans. We had what we referred to as “joint interrogation centers.”

Jim: German army?

Joe: Mm-hmm.

Jim: German army folks [?]. How’d you get on with them?

Joe: Very well.

Jim: Were they pleasant and nice and—

Joe: Very professional.

Jim: They were?

Joe: Yes.

Jim: Were most of them ex-World War II soldiers?

Joe: No, I would—

Jim: German military, or are they too young for that?

Joe: I would say it was a different generation of soldier, and most of the people that I worked with. Actually, I worked with a combination of both civilian and military. So, I was—

- Jim: Yeah, because their spooks, of course, would be in civilian clothes.
- Joe: Typically.
- Jim: Right [laughs]. Then we have another key question. Did you fraternize with them, off duty?
- Joe: Very minimally because I had my family over there.
- Jim: Ah, that's right. I forgot that. I just was curious as to how close you got with these guys. Whether it's just on a work-only basis, or whether you really became chums.
- Joe: I never really became that close to any of the Germans other than perhaps a German dependent that was in the same quarters where my family was living.
- Jim: And how did your wife enjoy living in Germany?
- Joe: Well, I think it was a new experience for us that we'll never forget. Because everything was in German, of course, we had to adapt to everything: all instructions in German, and TV in German, and—
- Jim: But on the other hand, if you're going to do your job, you more or less had to do that. Isn't that correct?
- Joe: That is correct, yes.
- Jim: It's just that your wife didn't have to do that, necessarily [laughs].
- Joe: That's correct.
- Jim: Yeah, that's probably stressful for her.
- Joe: Yeah.
- Jim: Did you have children then?
- Joe: I had one daughter at that point.
- Jim: Okay. Send her to school? Or she's probably too young for school.
- Joe: Too young for school.
- Jim: And did your wife enjoy living there, or did she get along with the other ladies?

Joe: She went along with all the other ladies, and I think she enjoyed the time over there.

Jim: She'd get most of the things she wanted from the PX and so forth?

Joe: Correct.

Jim: Did you shop in the German city? I forget what city you were in, but—

Joe: Munich.

Jim: Oh, wow. Then there's plenty of shopping in Munich.

Joe: Absolutely.

Jim: Yeah, it's a great city.

Joe: It was beautiful.

Jim: Did you find it so, or—

Joe: Absolutely. We did a lot of shopping. We also did a lot of dining on the market.

Jim: Of course. Very nice. The food's good over there.

Joe: Oh, absolutely. *I love* German food.

Jim: Me too, right.

Joe: And the German beer was extremely--

Jim: They're the experts, they're the experts. How long were you there?

Joe: I was there for just a little over a year, and all of a sudden I had red hot orders for Vietnam. So, that took me and my family back to the United States.

Jim: And left the family, of course.

Joe: Well, I had to leave en route back to the United States. I took a little leave, but I also—by the time I got back to the United States and had to leave for a few days I was notified that my red hot orders for Vietnam were cancelled, and in lieu of that they sent me to some additional military intelligence training and some Vietnamese language training before I ultimately ended up in Vietnam.

Jim: Now your mission has changed a little.

- Joe: Yes, indeed it has.
- Jim: It's become more difficult, too, I'm sure.
- Joe: Well, it's become more difficult because of—well, not only increase in rank, but also increase in areas of responsibility and being trained in languages more than just German.
- Jim: Now we're a captain, are we?
- Joe: We're a captain at this point.
- Jim: Very good, right. You moved up rather rapidly, though, actually.
- Joe: Yes, I did. I was very fortunate.
- Jim: Yeah. You must have been a hotshot. So, different intelligence. Planned to work in Vietnam. Was that reading traffic again, or—
- Joe: No, this was actually more tactical intelligence. It was analyzing information available to us. It was more working with the Vietnamese army and helping their intelligence apparatus work more efficiently. It was also utilizing agents, people that would be collecting specific information. We'd ask them that we need information on this and information on that and task them accordingly.
- Jim: These are ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] troops?
- Joe: These are ARVN troops.
- Jim: How'd you get along with them?
- Joe: Pretty good. I worked through my counterpart who was a major. And we had mutual respect for each other.
- Jim: Did he seem like a good person, and—
- Joe: He was very easy to get along with, yes.
- Jim: Well, that's nice.
- Joe: And being somewhat able to speak a little Vietnamese—they didn't train me very well in Vietnamese. They only gave me eleven weeks of training which was just not even conversational Vietnamese at that point.
- Jim: Just learn a lot of nouns and point, right?

- Joe: Yes.
- Jim: He spoke some English?
- Joe: He spoke some English, and I had two interpreters working on my staff as well. So, made it a little easier.
- Jim: And you were based where?
- Joe: I was stationed at Vinh Long which is a province in the Delta just below Saigon, southwest.
- Jim: Just south of Saigon, yeah, I know where that is. Southwest, right.
- Joe: And just north of Cần Thơ which was a major position within the Delta.
- Jim: So, all your work there was all office work in the Delta [?]. You didn't have to get out in the field for any particular reason?
- Joe: No! [laughs] No, not at all. Most of my work was out in the field.
- Jim: Oh, just the other way around?
- Joe: Yes, indeed.
- Jim: [laughs] My goodness!
- Joe: We had district teams that I had to work with, and I was moving around. And also frequently flying with what we called the "firefly" missions which was essentially being onboard a helicopter during the night above the airfield with a Vietnamese counterpart and being able to act as a command and control ship if there was any attack on the airfield during the night.
- Jim: From land forces?
- Joe: From land forces, yeah.
- Jim: Did you utilize those sensors that Winter Hess from Mequon [Mequon, Wisconsin] dropped along the paths for the Vietnamese? We just had him here, and he's got one of those downstairs and the pictures of that.
- Joe: Absolutely. Yeah, I—
- Jim: Did you know him, or anything about him?
- Joe: No, I did not.

- Jim: Charming guy. But he had these things. They'd drop 'em from his OV-10s ["Bronco," light attack and observation plane] down, he said, every hundred yards along this assumed path, and then he had to monitor those things. That's what he did.
- Joe: We didn't use any of those in Vinh Long as far as I know.
- Jim: Okay.
- Joe: Not while I was there, anyway.
- Jim: Well, and actually now that I think about it, I think most of his work was done along the Laotian border because the supply route was through Laos and then into Vietnam again, you know. Those guys, they dug those trails outside of Vietnam where they could and then ducked into the country from, you know, they got close to where they wanted to be. But that's where he was, along the border, I think. In Laos. Okay. So, on a firefly mission, is this something that started what, in the evening?
- Joe: Yes.
- Jim: 9 o'clock?
- Joe: Usually, 9:00 or 10:00.
- Jim: And you're up there for how long?
- Joe: Usually a couple hours, and then we'll come down, land, refuel, and maybe go back up a couple hours depending on what's—
- Jim: Goin' on.
- Joe: Yeah, what was going on in the area.
- Jim: So that was—and then you're up there 'til 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning.
- Joe: Absolutely.
- Jim: And then you got some rest?
- Joe: Whenever I got the chance.
- Jim: Right.

- Joe: Yes, I was also active in what they call the “Phoenix Program.” The “Phung Hoang” is the Vietnamese term. And that was—
- Jim: I’ve heard that name, and I can’t remember what that was.
- Joe: Well, that was targeting the infrastructure of the Viet Cong.
- Jim: Oh, yes. Okay, Bob Clampitt here is one of our docents here. He worked with ARVN, and he spoke of this Phoenix Program.
- Joe: Mm-hmm.
- Jim: And he was in the Army also.
- Joe: Okay.
- Jim: He said he liked the ARVN troops, but he said he didn’t care for their officers. He thought they were second rate. He said, “The ARVN troops were pretty. They were pretty good guys, and they were reliable” because—he thought. The officers that lead ‘em, he thought—was unimpressed with ‘em. That was just one man’s opinion.
- Joe: Well, I think that can be said even with our forces to some extent. You have some good officers, you have some mediocre officers, and you’ve got some officers that are not as ambitious as what they should be. And I think that’s pretty commonplace and universal.
- Jim: Mm-hmm. What about the trade school boys? Were they gung-ho most of the time?
- Joe: Referring to?
- Jim: West Point.
- Joe: Well, I didn’t really meet any West Point graduates while I was over there, so I—we did have one lieutenant colonel that was on our province level staff that was highly educated. I think he had a master’s degree, and, you know, I had a lot of respect for him. And he was a real ambitious soldier and dedicated.
- Jim: Now, did you call home every night?
- Joe: No! No, that was a little difficult to do from most of the points where I was at.
- Jim: Oh.
- Joe: I was not always—

Jim: At back, in the base?

Joe: In Vinh Long all the time.

Jim: I see.

Joe: I was frequently out at many of the other district teams which were scattered throughout the province.

Jim: Your responsibility was to see that they were doing their thing--the proper things and checking on them in the smaller units?

Joe: Yes, they were more or less working with the ARVN at their level, and they had—

Jim: Well, they'd go out in the field with 'em.

Joe: Yes. You might even think of it as like the—what Tom Ridge has now created as far as the Homeland Security and directorate. They were the homeland security for their governmental level. In other words, whether it be the province which would be similar to our state, or the district which would be comparable to our county level of government. And they were more or less responsible for their select areas.

Jim: And, so how many of these provinces did you oversee?

Joe: Well, I only oversaw the one province. Within that province we had about, I think it was, six district teams.

Jim: So you more or less circulated between these—

Joe: Yes.

Jim: Six bases?

Joe: Yes.

Jim: How many folks would you have in each one of those district bases?

Joe: Usually, we had two or three on the district teams that were—

Jim: They would have one or two helicopters and two or three guys and that sort of thing, or more?

- Joe: No, they wouldn't have the helicopters necessarily. We had a command and supply ship helicopter that would frequently get around to each of the district teams to resupply them.
- Jim: Because these weren't [unintelligible] out in the bush, weren't they? Yeah.
- Joe: That's correct, yeah.
- Jim: They didn't have any source of food and anything unless you brought it to them.
- Joe: That's correct.
- Jim: Okay. I'm trying to get this picture here.
- Joe: I should qualify that because they would have access to the Vietnamese markets as far as their food is concerned, and they were in like a district level city so they were more or less living on the economy in Vietnam.
- Jim: Yeah. Did you get along with the Vietnam civilians, or did you let 'em do their own thing?
- Joe: Actually, I had one Vietnam civilian working for me as an interpreter. The other interpreter was a Vietnam ARVN soldier. And so I got along well with both.
- Jim: They seem like nice chaps, and so forth?
- Joe: As far as getting along with the Vietnamese people, as long as I could attempt to come across and try to speak their language, they'd bend over backwards to try to work with me and communicate. Just—from the Americans' point of view, I think that was a major blunder by many of the American soldiers while they were over there.
- Jim: Not trying hard enough?
- Joe: Not trying to learn about the people, their culture, their language. All they cared about was how soon they got home. And the Vietnamese people would really open up if you made an effort to learn a little more about their culture, their language, and why they were there.
- Jim: Mm-hmm. Good point, good point. Did you have many wounded of these chaps out in the bush?
- Joe: Unfortunately, yes. Yes.
- Jim: They would be encircled, and get in a firefight, and—

Joe: And many times I was in control of the helicopter and basically directed it to provide medevac.

Jim: Yeah, and rescue these guys.

Joe: Yes.

Jim: 'Cause they weren't—doesn't sound like they were very well protected.

Joe: No, no. They weren't that heavily armed as well. And limited ammunition, etcetera.

Jim: Very precarious duty, I think, out there.

Joe: I think so.

Jim: Two or three guys, and—

Joe: They had many outposts which were overrun, and we'd have to go in the next morning and find out why.

Jim: It's unpleasant business.

Joe: It's unpleasant business, but it's business of war.

Jim: Yeah, sure, of course. And anybody shoot at your helicopter when you're out visiting?

Joe: Yes, sir.

Jim: I'll bet. As long as they weren't 50s [M2 Browning .50 caliber machine gun], it wasn't too bad.

Joe: Yeah, that's—

Jim: Those 50s go right through, too, don't they?

Joe: Yes, I remember one time when a 50 came up through the bottom of the helicopter.

Jim: Boy, I'll bet that gave you a start. That would scare the willies outta me.

Joe: Yeah, it didn't make me very happy.

Jim: No, I'm sure. I'm sure.

Joe: I count my blessings I'm still here.

Jim: Ray Boland [Wis. Dept. of Veterans Affairs Secretary at the time] runs this place, you know, is a Cobra pilot. And he said that those 50s they were really, really tough 'cause they'd go right through.

Joe: Yeah.

Jim: And he said the other thing they worried about—which I didn't know until he told me—he said they tried to stay away when the B-52s were bombing.

Joe: Absolutely.

Jim: And I said, "Well, of course they're not gonna hit and bomb you." "No, no," he said. "You don't understand." He said, "The concussion from those bombs going off below you on the ground if you were nearby. They'd tip your helicopter right over." He said, "It was intense." And they just stayed the hell away from them. Well, I didn't know about that. So, and how long were you there in Vietnam?

Joe: I was there just a little over eleven months.

Jim: That was a standard tour, wasn't it? A year and then you rotate?

Joe: Yes.

Jim: And then you were allowed, what? A year at home, or six months, or—

Joe: I believe thirty days.

Jim: That's all?

Joe: Yes, sir.

Jim: Back at it?

Joe: Back at it.

Jim: Same duty, same place?

Joe: No, different duty.

Jim: Oh.

- Joe: This was--after I finished Vietnam I came home, and I was assigned right here at Madison, Wisconsin.
- Jim: What a contrast [laughs].
- Joe: Absolutely. But it was back to the four seasons, and I appreciated it.
- Jim: Sure. You bet. I'm sure you were tired of the heat and the--
- Joe: Christmas time in Vietnam: 104 degrees and bright sun, and anticipate the monsoons at 4 o'clock.
- Jim: Oh, my, my, my.
- Joe: So, it was a very routine pattern over there in Vietnam.
- Jim: At the base that you were stationed at, did you have adequate supplies and adequate food and all that? It was big enough to—
- Joe: Yes, I—
- Jim: You didn't have any problems there.
- Joe: I had no problems.
- Jim: You had a hospital there?
- Joe: We did not have a hospital there. We had a hospital down at Cần Thơ which was within, oh, like five minutes flying time or thirty minutes driving time.
- Jim: But you had a dispensary probably of some kind. A corpsman running a dispensary?
- Joe: No sir, we did not.
- Jim: Oh, really? Usually they have—
- Joe: No. We were dependent on the Vietnamese for that support.
- Jim: Oh, really? Oh, my. Okay. And you could call home from there?
- Joe: Yes, I could call home from there. More from the tactical operations center than from our quarters.
- Jim: Okay. And did the boys that worked under you—did they seem reasonably happy?

- Joe: I had no problem. I had a good bunch of people working with me, and it was quite effective.
- Jim: Did they have to learn the language, too? Did you insist that they spend some time learning the language?
- Joe: No, I did not insist. I definitely immersed them into that structure, however.
- Jim: Sure, and certainly encouraged them.
- Joe: Yes.
- Jim: Did you handle written material, too? Did that cross your purview?
- Joe: Some, yes.
- Jim: I mean maps and things like that.
- Joe: Yes.
- Jim: Statistics of—
- Joe: Some captured documents that we would—
- Jim: Did you pass it on up the chain?
- Joe: Yes, we'd have to use my Vietnamese counterpart to help analyze that kind of information.
- Jim: So, between the two of you, you made a judgment about what the material was and sent that back? Is that the way it went?
- Joe: That's correct.
- Jim: That work out pretty well? You seem to--
- Joe: Yes, indeed.
- Jim: It wasn't hard to do that? It wasn't in difficult codes to break or anything like that?
- Joe: Not at my level, no.
- Jim: Oh, okay. Well, that'd be another problem [laughs].

Joe: Absolutely. I think the war was much more intense in some of the northern areas of Vietnam, more so than in my province. So I was indeed fortunate for that.

Jim: Did you go to Saigon often?

Joe: I went to Saigon probably about ten to twelve times during the course of my year, yes. But it was not always fun; it was mostly work-related.

Jim: One of my [coughs] high school classmates from West High, she was with the CIA and got blown up in the embassy when the Tet Offensive began. And—

Joe: Oh, gosh!

Jim: It was, '72, somewhere—Yeah. She was—it took her six months—

Joe: Tet Offensive was '68.

Jim: '68?

Joe: Yeah.

Jim: Took her, I think she was--six months before she was back workin'. Lots of plastic surgery because the blast blew in her office. Nice girl. And very experienced. She had put a full career in with the CIA. Travelled all over the world. Has lots of stories. But she enjoyed Saigon. Said there was a couple places that were reasonably good to eat, and she had a bunch of girls who were all in the same building. So she said that other than being away from home, it was not too bad.

Joe: Oh, I enjoyed some of the Vietnamese dishes; it was good food. And being down at a province level, I was—I had the opportunity to eat both American food versus Vietnamese food. I usually had a choice. And I frequently ate on the economy [living or shopping off base].

Jim: Right. And you had no trouble getting mail? Mail was no problem for any of the people at your base?

Joe: No, no.

Jim: Yeah, that's one thing with this war. And tell me about the drug situation. Did your people—did you have to monitor any of that? These guys that were under your purview—they get involved with drugs, and how did you deal with them?

Joe: I fortunately didn't have that much problem with my soldiers because in the military intelligence branch I think we have a little better caliber of soldier—

Jim: Better quality.

Joe: And certainly they know that their security clearance and their very job is at risk if they start dealing in it and using.

Jim: Right. They'll end up out in the bush [laughs].

Joe: Yes.

Jim: Of course, some of your people did.

Joe: Yes.

Jim: Even though they were very bright in intelligence, they still ended up out there in the weeds.

Joe: Absolutely, yup, yeah.

Jim: It's a tough—it was a tough war. One of these guys, he said, "Ya know," he said, "we won that war, except we just lost it. I mean, we did every encounter we won. But then we ended up losin' the whole, ya know, the whole match." He said, "It wasn't fair."

Joe: Well, it was a different type of war, there is no question about it. And I think it can be described more of a political war than a conventional war. And when it's a political war, politicians reign versus military commanders. And that's attributed to the result.

Jim: So there's an almost built in conflict here.

Joe: Yes, yes.

Jim: Conflict of purpose, then. Heiliger, do you know Don Heiliger?

Joe: No, I do not.

Jim: He's a supervisor in Stoughton [Wisconsin].

Joe: I recognize the name now that you mention Stoughton, or associate—

Jim: Five and a half years in the "Hanoi Hilton" [Hoa Lo Prison].

Joe: Okay.

Jim: What a story.

- Joe: I can imagine.
- Jim: What a story. I don't know how he survived. He didn't either. Absolutely incredible.
- Joe: A strong willpower.
- Jim: Yeah. He and John McCain were there together.
- Joe: Mm-hmm.
- Jim: In that lovely place. Ugh! The torture seems incredible. I don't know how they stood it.
- Joe: Well, we have—in fact, I have in my scrapbook I've got a little card that I've got laminated. It's called, "The Tap Code." And we were trained if we ever got captured, you know, this was certainly one way to communicate in the absence of verbal communication.
- Jim: Yeah, they used it all. They even developed sign language. On top of each of their cells, including the [unintelligible] guarding each one, top thing was open!
- Joe: Mm-hmm.
- Jim: And so with one guy holdin' another guy up, you could look over and you could see the other guy, if he was being held up from the other side. So they invented their own sign language. He said we learned how we could talk—do that almost as fast as talking 'cause they weren't allowed to make any noise [unintelligible].
- Joe: Sure.
- Jim: The ingenuity you develop, he said, is incredible.
- Joe: Yes.
- Jim: Under such circumstances. Well, anyway. So, did you have any risk of being captured? With all your knowledge of the situation you were a potential risk.
- Joe: I think I was always at risk, but the threat in my area was perhaps less than up north. And we didn't really—our security was enough that we could avoid a potential problem as far as being captured because we usually were working in teams of several of us rather than just working individually. And usually when I went around I had at least one, maybe more, American GIs with me and my Vietnamese interpreters as well. So it was a group effort or a team effort, more

than any other factor. So consequently I think they were less likely to strike at some people like us. We were a less vulnerable target.

Jim: Was sabotage a problem at your base?

Joe: No, fortunately. I was very pleased to **[End of Tape One, Side A]** to not have a major attack at our base.

Jim: Any infiltration of some North Vietnamese that came down as, you know, masquerading as South Vietnamese?

Joe: There again, I don't know what I can talk about and what I can't talk about. So, I'd rather not talk about it and err on the side of safety.

Jim: Oh, okay. I didn't realize that was still a threat to the—

Joe: I don't think it's a threat. I don't know whether it's been declassified or not.

Jim: Oh. I would have no way of knowing that.

Joe: Nor would I, at this point.

Jim: Yeah, yeah. I understand. The—I mean, what else I was gonna ask you. How'd your wife get along with you overseas for a year?

Joe: Well, that's basically what attributed to my divorce. And I think it was very straining on her. And—

Jim: It's really tough.

Joe: When I came home, I--in fact, I have a strange experience I should probably talk about, too. I had a unique opportunity for one of my R and Rs [Rest and Recuperation], which was a two week vacation if you want to think of it as that. I flew to Saigon, and then I flew to Hawaii. And I had New Year's Eve and New Year's Day in Saigon, and I had New Year's Eve and New Year's Day again in Hawaii. [Approx. 15 sec. pause in recording]—have these nice high rise hotels, with a lanai, which is a balcony, and from the eighth floor of the balcony they take a string of firecrackers and drop 'em over. And coming from Vietnam I was probably more keyed up there in Hawaii than I was in Vietnam, simply because of all the firecrackers going off, etcetera. But the very idea of having a New Year's Eve and New Year's Day of the same year in two different parts of the world was very unique. Very unusual.

Jim: That's good. Okay. And now you say your next assignment, tell me about that.

- Joe: Well, my next assignment was here in Madison, Wisconsin. I was special agent in charge of the Madison Resident Office which was military intelligence. I was—
- Jim: Madison Resident Office?
- Joe: Yes.
- Jim: For intelligence in Madison, Wisconsin?
- Joe: Yes, sir.
- Jim: [laughs] I apologize for laughing, but, you know, I just—you know we don't see a lot of threats around here, you see, and so it's hard to go from the front lines to dinky old Madison in the middle of nowhere.
- Joe: Absolutely! It was quite a change for me, too, [Jim laughs], dealing in tactical intelligence and then switching in midstream and being more conscious of—well, demonstrations.
- Jim: Before you start worrying about [unintelligible] problems instead of the language problems, you see.
- Joe: Well, I was dealing more in terms of demonstrations against the war and everything else that was—
- Jim: When did you get here?
- Joe: I got back in April of '71 or '72. I can't remember.
- Jim: Tell me again, what was that office? Your official office here in Madison.
- Joe: We were military intelligence.
- Jim: Yeah, but you said some other word. Military intelligence.
- Joe: I was special agent in charge of the Military Intelligence Resident Office.
- Jim: Resident Office—that's it, Resident Office. That's a fancy term. Special agent in charge. And your duties involved watching civilians, then?
- Joe: Not so much as watching civilians as monitoring intelligence through law enforcement activities.
- Jim: I mean, here the only enemy around here is wild kids.

Joe: Well, we also had responsibility for doing background investigations on individuals who were being considered for security clearances throughout the Department of Defense.

Jim: You were working for the government?

Joe: Yes.

Jim: I see. Okay, well, that--

Joe: So that was our primary mission.

Jim: Ah, okay. I'm getting it better now [laughs].

Joe: It's a little more understandable.

Jim: Right, you weren't just wasting the government's money here.

Joe: No, sir. No, it wasn't a vacation assignment by any means.

Jim: Oh, it wasn't?

Joe: No, very busy.

Jim: Oh, you were? Oh, my goodness. How big an office we talkin' about? You had how many people under you?

Joe: I had generally two to five more people under me at any given time.

Jim: Oh, my.

Joe: And consequently we covered most of—about thirteen different counties here in southwestern Wisconsin.

Jim: Was it difficult work, or just busywork?

Joe: Busywork. Not difficult. It gave me an opportunity to meet a lot of different people.

Jim: Sure.

Joe: Doing the interviews, etcetera.

Jim: And you got married again.

Joe: And I got married again one year after I got divorced.

Jim: I did the same thing.

Joe: So, and I still have that wife to this day. So—

Jim: Mine, too.

Joe: Second time around was much more meaningful.

Jim: Well, you use a different set of values the second time around.

Joe: I think, different set of values—

Jim: More adult views.

Joe: And you learn by your mistakes.

Jim: Of course, of course. So, you've been here since that time?

Joe: Yes, sir. I had the opportunity while I was here at Madison to also be incorporated into what they called the Defense Investigative Services. The agents that were working for the Navy, agents that were working for the Air Force, and agents that were working with Army were consolidated into the Defense Investigative Service. And those offices then took over the responsibility of background investigations throughout Wisconsin and throughout the United States. And I worked for them for a period of time, but I was a little higher in rank at that point, and consequently they didn't need somebody with my rank at that point, and that's where I separated from the service. As far as active duty service.

Jim: Oh. Yeah, you're not in the service now.

Joe: No. No, I separated in September of 1973 from active duty here in Madison, and then decided to go back to school here at the University of Wisconsin.

Jim: In '73?

Joe: That's correct.

Jim: And you returned to school?

Joe: Yes.

Jim: Did you get a Ph.D. or a master's?

Joe: Oh, I got my bachelor's finally—

- Jim: Oh, yeah. That's right. Went to college. All right. Now, [background]. If you were in that business in that office and somebody said, "Here's a name. Ya know, look into this." Would that be something you'd just start with a phonebook and find out where he lived, and then go from there? How could you suddenly find out something about him?
- Joe: Well, first of all, I had to establish is there a connection to the Army?
- Jim: Oh, I see. Oh.
- Joe: It's not that we could investigate civilians.
- Jim: Anybody.
- Joe: No. There had to be a threat to the Army as opposed to any other factor.
- Jim: And you had to understand that before you pursued it?
- Joe: Yes, yes.
- Jim: Well, that would mean a threat to the Army it'd probably somewhat involved whatever business a fellow was in.
- Joe: Well, the threat to the Army—perhaps an attempted sabotage of government equipment, any different things could have been involved.
- Jim: Well, see, four guys drove—what was it? Eight tanks out of—
- Joe: Fort McCoy?
- Jim: Fort McCoy. And stole 'em and it took 'em a year and a half before they found that out, or something like that, so—
- Joe: I think they disbanded the [Jim laughs] Army military intelligence office here at Madison before that happened.
- Jim: I couldn't believe that story!
- Joe: I couldn't either.
- Jim: [laughs] I mean, it isn't like stealing a diamond, you know, but a tank! And then not only one, but several they marched off with—
- Joe: Yeah, yeah.

- Jim: I'm sure that the supply officer's career in the Army came to an abrupt halt [laughs].
- Joe: Well, I think there were a few jobs that were certainly in jeopardy at Fort McCoy over that matter.
- Jim: Oh, yeah. I'm sure there were [laughs]. So anyway, your experience in the Army was all that you'd expected?
- Joe: I was very pleased with the fact that throughout my active duty military I got the education that I needed to support each assignment, and I was very—I considered a luxury to have the language training as well for my overseas assignments.
- Jim: That was wonderful. That was wonderful.
- Joe: And it certainly influenced what I got out of each of my assignments, and I think it did contribute to my effectiveness in each of those military assignments.
- Jim: Have you kept in contact with any of the folks that you were with in Vietnam or Germany?
- Joe: Yes, both. The camaraderie I had while I was with the military I hold very dear to my heart. It's one of the strongest bonds that I think I've seen in my lifetime.
- Jim: Is there a certain unit or part of units that get annual meetings or things like that? I suppose it's kind of difficult, but—
- Joe: Frequently we have reunions. In fact, I was just at one last weekend at Fort McCoy. It was a retirement ceremony, but being a retired member I was invited to come back and participate.
- Jim: Oh, how nice.
- Joe: And it's always a pleasure.
- Jim: Yeah. That's great. Did you join any veterans organizations?
- Joe: I'm a member of the American Legion, and I was a member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars for a period of time. That was primarily while I was up at the Twin Cities in my Reserve affiliation.
- Jim: Oh, you stayed in the Reserves after you—
- Joe: Yes, after I got off of active duty I joined the Reserves and was with the Reserves from 1974 through 1997.

- Jim: Oh, I see. What did that duty involve? Monthly meetings, weekly meetings, or—
- Joe: [laughs] It was very diverse types of assignments, and normally the expectation was one weekend per month and one two-week annual training per year, but most of my assignments weren't that easy, so to speak. It was more complicated and required much more participation than just the routine.
- Jim: This is at a desk; it wasn't out in the field.
- Joe: Some of it was out in the field. Some of it was—
- Jim: Oh, really?
- Joe: Indeed.
- Jim: What would you do out in the field?
- Joe: Military exercises in support of the brigade. Again, that was tactical intelligence as opposed to straight military intelligence.
- Jim: Well, it got you a little fresh air, and—
- Joe: Absolutely.
- Jim: Get you away from what you ordinarily do and so forth and so on.
- Joe: Sure.
- Jim: I think a lot of guys I talk to enjoyed their Reserve time.
- Joe: I was very lucky in my Reserve affiliations. I started out here in Madison, as a matter of fact. With the 247th Military Intelligence Detachment that was stationed here in Madison. And that was a detachment in support of an infantry brigade. And again, tactical intelligence. But a lot of that was at Fort McCoy and other military bases, and field maneuvers was required.
- Jim: Okay. I'm running out of things to ask you now.
- Joe: Well, to give you an idea from that assignment, I went up to—spent fourteen years with 88th Army Reserve Command up in the Twin Cities. And that was fourteen years where at least once a month I was commuting back and forth to the Twin Cities, and—
- Jim: Well, that's a really Active Reserve, wasn't it?

- Joe: And that was Active Reserve. And I ended up as Chief of Intelligence and Security for the Army Reserve Command, which was responsible for Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin.
- Jim: I was just gonna say, how big is that? Three states.
- Joe: Yeah.
- Jim: Well, that's—just almost like an active—I mean, that's like being active rather than in the Reserve.
- Joe: It was a pretty complicated assignment, yes, indeed, sir.
- Jim: Boy, that's a lot of paperwork and a lot of shuffling around to keep everything in order.
- Joe: Yeah, indeed.
- Jim: My, my, my.
- Joe: But I enjoyed that, and then my last assignment was at Fort McCoy where I was deputy commandant to the intelligence school, and it's the first time I ever had an office with windows [Jim laughs]. 'Cause all of my other offices, for security reasons, were basement-type offices. And not only that, but at Fort McCoy I had a window where I could look out and actually see deer grazing up there at Fort McCoy. It was phenomenal. And I always considered that as my pristine assignment.
- Jim: That sounds wonderful.
- Joe: Yes. But that's where I retired from.
- Jim: Now, do they have you on hold if they want you now? If they're gonna send you to Afghanistan?
- Joe: Well, I'm Retired Reserve.
- Jim: Did you ever learn how to speak Afghanistani or Farsi?
- Joe: No. I did pick up a little Arabic in a Middle East orientation course that I attended with the Air Force out of their special operations course. But that was just conversational Arabic and certainly by no means—much less even than the Vietnamese training that I got.
- Jim: So you're not on hold then? Or on alert, or—

Joe: No, I'm not. No, I don't anticipate that they're gonna pick up the phone and call me back here at this point. They let the younger soldiers do that today.

Jim: I would think so. I would think so. Besides, it's not very pleasant over there. I understand the weather in Afghanistan is—

Joe: Not that I wouldn't welcome the opportunity.

Jim: Well, you mean to contribute something.

Joe: Absolutely.

Jim: Sure, well, we all would. I mean, we all do whatever we'd have to.

Joe: That's precisely it.

Jim: Right.

Joe: We're always working at the discretion of our commander in chief.

Jim: Exactly, exactly. Okay, sir. You've done it. Thank you very kindly. I appreciate it.

Joe: Well, thank you for the opportunity.

Jim: I take these home, and I put 'em on a regular videotape.

Joe: Okay.

Jim: And I'll send you one.

Joe: Sounds good, sir.

Jim: Yeah.

[End of Interview]