

MIKE YAGGY USMC OFFICER

'66 - '67

Producer: You know, your education and how on earth did you end up in the U.S. Military right in the midst of one of this quite prominent war that is still is part of our history here?

Mike: I grew up in Baltimore. My parents lived here. I went to Franklin and Marshall College, and while I was in college, I signed up for the Marine Corps officer program. This was in the early '60s because I thought I'd rather spend three years as an officer in the Marine Corps doing sort of intelligence work than two years in the Army as a private because the draft was still very active.

I graduated from college in June of '65, finished my pre-commissioning training in the Marine Corps, and was commissioned in September of '65. Now by that time, people had heard of Vietnam. I had not heard of Vietnam when I signed up, and in February of '66, I was designated an infantry officer and received orders to Vietnam and arrived in Vietnam in March of 1966. A day or two after my arrival, I was assigned as a rifle platoon commander in the First Battalion Ninth Marines. At that time we were guarding the air base at Da Nang for I think three or four weeks, and then we moved southwest from there into Vietcong territory.

I served as a platoon commander from March until October, I guess, of '66. I became the battalion intelligence officer and then was detached from the battalion for several months in the Mekong delta doing some things, rejoined the battalion in January of '67, did some other things, and then rotated home in May of 1967. That's the short story of how I ended up there.

Producer: Sure. Now give me the detailed story.

Mike: We went from Okinawa on a Marine C-130 into Da Nang. I remember this very well. We arrived, and there was ... I forget maybe 30 marines on the plane. We got off the C-130 by this hangar, and we were taken into this hangar. This colonel came out. He was a fairly short colonel, and he stood on this ammunition box. He said, "I'm Colonel so-and-so. You're now in Vietnam, and you'll be here until the commandant tells you to leave." That was the end of the introduction to Vietnam, and later that day, I was at my company and the next morning was given command of the second platoon of Delta Company.

For two or three weeks, maybe four weeks, we guarded the air base of Da Nang. At that time Da Nang was a very small single strip airfield. The Marine squadrons were on one side and the Air Force on the other. It did not become the big base that it eventually became. We ran patrols at night around the airstrip trying to intercept Vietcong that might be trying to get in. It was not much activity there,

and we left there and went southwest to a place called Hill 55. We stepped into it with the Vietcong right away.

The way we operated ... and this changed as the war went on ... but the way we were operating ... and this is relatively early in the Vietnam experience for the country. A platoon would be sent out on a patrol, and I'd be sent out for three hours, three days, five days, one day. You'd be given a mission. We want you to follow this course. See what's happening. See if you can create some activity, and as I say it could range from three hours to three days, four days. We'd go out and try and locate the Vietcong. We would try and intercept them. We would try and provide security if that was the mission.

Every once in a while there would be these ... they were called search and destroy missions where we were supposed to get ... the whole company would get together and maybe part of the battalion and we would do a sweep through an area, looking for Vietcong, looking for supplies. My own sense of it was pretty much a waste of time. We rarely ran into anything when we were operating in that large of a group. The Vietcong saw no point in taking on a couple of hundred Marines coming through the rice paddies and villages. So they'd be gone. Then we'd go back to just a platoon-size patrol. They were more likely you could find contact.

I won't say daily, but almost daily we'd have some sort of contact with Vietcong. It might just be a landmine or a booby trap. It might be a sniper. We might set up our own ambushes, and we might catch some coming into a village at night. We'd do night patrols to try and catch them because they would move primarily at night because day time where we were was so open they were ... you could see for miles, and we had aircraft surveillance so they didn't come out very much during the day. So we worked at night a lot to try and track them down. Every once in a while we'd run into a larger VC unit that was prepared to stand and fight, and we'd have it out with them.

Producer: What would be considered to be larger VC?

Mike: From ... When I was just out by myself with my platoon, I think the largest unit that I ran into under sort of those circumstances maybe 25 of Vietcong. I mean we didn't kill them all so I don't know how many got away, but I don't think too many got away. That was a fairly unique scenario. It was more typically four or five, six bad guys, or maybe one sniper, and you would try and work some people around to cut off his line of retreat or withdrawal and get him that way.

It was a very intense period if you were the platoon commander because you were out by yourself. You had your platoon, and that would vary in size depending on casualties and replacements. You'd have weapons attached to

your machine guns and mortars and stuff. It might be as low as 30 people. It might be as many as 60, 70 people. Occasionally have tanks with you.

But you were in charge. It was your show, and in a certain way, I enjoyed that because I was out on my own. I had my orders. Here's where we want you to go and sort of how you get there, how you do it is your business. You make the calls.

Producer: You're about 22 then?

Mike: 22, 23, something like that. I was the second or third oldest person in the platoon. My platoon sergeant was ... he was very old. He was like 35. The platoon guide was in his early 30s, maybe 32. Then there was me, and then ... I know there was one other guy, Sergeant Wilson, who had been in Korea was older than me, and everybody else was in their late teens, 20, 21, something like that.

It was a very diverse group of people from all kinds of backgrounds. I had an Indian from Maine named Shay [phonetic 00:08:21]. I had a couple of people from Wisconsin and then people from all over. My radio operator was from California, and my 60 mortar operator was from Maine so we had a wide diversity of people. Some Hispanics. Only one or two blacks at that time. A lot of people from the South.

Producer: So since this was very early in the war ...?

Mike: It changed very rapidly for me, and I think for others in our battalion anyway. When we moved out of Da Nang down to Hill 55, it was ... Our sense was that we were to try and drive out the bad guys and secure the villages and the roads for the South Vietnamese. We thought that we were welcomed as protectors, and there was some of that, but I think fairly quickly at least in my mind, I think in the minds of some others ... This is in the summer of '66 before the real buildup, real question as to whether this was going to work.

There was an event that occurred to me that really made me think about it. This was in July or August of '66, and I was out ... I was ordered to take this village because intelligence was pretty clear there were Vietcong in the village trying to extract taxes and food from the villagers. We took the village. I lost one of my marines in that fire fight, but we took the village, killed some of the Vietcong, and drove the others away. The South Vietnamese were then supposed to send a security force. I think they were called PFs, popular force, and they were then going to secure the village on a permanent basis because it was perceived to be an important village.

I had to take that same village two weeks later. The PF had left because they didn't want to mess around with Vietcong. We took it for the second time. I lost another marine taking it the second time, and that's when I started, "Wait a minute. We took it. We turned it over to the security people, and they left." Then I had to take it again. I lost another marine doing it. So I talked to our battalion commander just an incredible man, Major Day, James L. Day. I saw him some time after that second fire fight.

"Major Day, how are we going to win this war?" Because my experience was not unique. Other people had this ... I said, "How are we going to win this war? We take a village. We lose people doing it. We turn it over, and then we have to take it again and lose more people. This is going to keep going. How are we going to win this war?" He looked at me and said, "Mike, we're not going to win this war." This was in as I say July or August of '66. He said, "We're not going to win this." He was a medal of honor winner from Okinawa. He been and fought in Korea. He was a very experienced, very savvy guy, great mind. When he said we're not going to win it, if he says it, that's going to be true.

From that point on it was more a function of carrying out orders, getting things done, trying to accomplish the mission, but in the back of the mind, it was this ... at least in my mind ... the belief that this isn't going to work if we're taking the same places twice and losing people in the process. Again, it wasn't a unique experience for me. It was happening to other people. I think there was a ... again, I was just a second lieutenant. I had no strategic view of what was going on. My world was 2,000 yards in any direction because that's how far my 60 millimeter mortar could reach. Beyond 2,000 yards it really was out of my range.

We talked ... platoon commanders ... we'd get together every once in a while when we were back at the rear ... not at the rear but at the battalion main headquarters. As I say, my experience was not unique. There were those, there were a lot, that were still pretty enthusiastic about the war, that thought we could make a real difference, we could prevail. Over time, more and more troops arrived. More people arrived, and I think there for a period of time there was a sense that was a result of the buildup, we were going to be able to apply more pressure and more good things were going to happen. But I never came to that view.

I had one experience. Well, I had a lot of experiences, but one that in November ... parts of November and December. It was '66. I was sent down to the Makong delta to do some intelligence work down there. Our battalion was going to make a landing in the Makong landing in January of '67, early January, operation called Deck House Five. The object of the exercise was to capture a lot of supplies that the NVA were moving into the Makong delta. While I was down there in November and December, I went out on patrol. I went with CBs, not with CBs,

but with seals and with special forces. We could see these platforms being built in the swamps with supplies on them. It was clear that they were building up an inventory of military supplies.

I rejoined the battalion just before the landing in January. At that point, the South Vietnamese army had not been told of our operation. They knew we were down there, but they didn't know where we going to land or when we were going to land. It was two or three days before the landing we were ordered to tell our South Vietnamese liaison people when and where we were going to land. So we did that. We landed two or three days later. All the supplies were gone. The North Vietnamese were gone. The only thing that were left were some Vietcong and these empty supply points.

Either the day of the landing or maybe it was the day after, General Westmoreland [phonetic 00:15:56] flew down and came over to where Major Day had his little headquarters by an armored personnel carrier. He came over, and Major Day was introduced to Westmoreland, and I was introduced to him as the battalion intelligence officer. Westmoreland asked Major Day what the situation was, and Major Day told him that we had gone in, and we hadn't found the supplies. They were gone. Westmoreland turned to me and said, "What do you think happened?" I said, "Well, I was here in November and December. Those supplies were there. I saw them. I think what happened was when we told the South Vietnamese army liaison the word got out to the North Vietnamese and the stuff is gone."

Westmoreland turned and walked away and about five minutes later this army major came up to me. I assume he was Westmoreland's aide or part of his staff. I'm not sure. He said, "Lieutenant, General Westmoreland does not want to be told that the South Vietnamese can't be trusted with this information." I said, "Well, Major, he asked me what I thought. I told him what I thought. It was all there three weeks ago when I was down here. We told the South Vietnamese liaison, and all of a sudden it's all gone." He said, "Lieutenant, General Westmoreland doesn't want to hear stories like that." I thought, "This is a problem if the commander-in-chief in the area doesn't want to hear." I may have been wrong. Maybe it was just coincidental that everything was gone, but I don't think so. I thought if the commander-in-chief doesn't want to hear that, we've got big, big problems.

So I never really changed my view from the summer of '66 that this was not going to work. As I say, I was a second lieutenant. I had no strategic vision. All I knew was my experiences on a platoon level, but it just ... I just didn't have a good feeling that this was going to work out, and I sort of focusing on getting as many of my people home as I could.

Producer: You'd think ...

Mike: I think ... I only had limited experience with South Vietnamese army. I had a few engagements where they were involved, but certainly not as much as some others did. My sense of the South Vietnamese army at least when I saw them in the summer of '66 and the fall of '66 was that they were reasonably enthusiastic, not very proficient, and heavy fire would drive them away. If your own people are going to be driven away by heavy fire, you've got a problem. So that was my sense of them.

But I also think there was again this was from a second lieutenant's perspective, I just didn't have a sense that there was a clearly set out strategy for the winning of the war. I had the sense there was this strategy of engaging until we figure out what to do, but I'm not sure we ever figured out what to do. At least, I left in May of '67. I did not have the sense that by then we had figured out what to do. It seemed by that time I had been up in the DMZ with our battalion. We were in a major battle up there for a while, and we did a lot of damage to the North Vietnamese army. There was this one division that we took on.

But defeating them in the DMZ is one thing because there are not a lot of people there, not a lot of ... that's where not the life of the country. South Vietnam was. The DMZ was down south in the hill country and the rice paddies and Da Nang, Saigon, so forth, and so beating up the North Vietnamese army in the DMZ was satisfying, and I think it prolonged the war by being able to defeat their forces, but I think it was maybe a diversion from the more important task of trying to control people coming down into South Vietnam, shutting off the Ho Chi Min trail, getting into the hill country along the western side of South Vietnam and cutting off people coming in. We just didn't do that at least from my observation. We didn't engage them when ...

It just got discouraging after a while. You're going out on a three, four, five day patrol. Everybody's got their ammunition and food, whatever. You go out and get into fire fights and you kill bad guys and you take some casualties, and you're thinking, "What's the point of this?" As I was taught in the Marine Corps, what's the object of the exercise? What are you trying to accomplish? If it's just killing bad guys, I mean that's a necessary step, but that's not sufficient. You've got to do some other things. I'm just not sure we had figured out, at least from what I saw, what it was we needed to be doing to get a bigger and better strategy in place.

Producer: Of course when the buildup began to happen ...

Mike: It did for a while. I got out of the Marine Corps in September of '68, but I had stayed fairly current while I was still on active duty through intelligence reports

with respect to what was happening, and I did feel some optimism that maybe things were going to get better. The Tet Offensive was in February of '67. I was still ... or '68 rather while I was still on active duty, and there were two perceptions of the Tet Offensive I thought. There was the purely military perspective in which it was clear we had afflicted tremendous casualties and damage on the North Vietnamese. They lost an awful lot of men in that offensive. That was one perception.

Then there was the Walter Cronkite perception. If after three years or however long we had been fighting, they could get that many North Vietnamese soldiers into South Vietnam with tanks and engage in a major pitched battle, even if they lost the battle, we've got a problem here. I think he was right. We put in more forces. There was no more Tet Offensives, but I think the North Vietnamese had figured out they didn't need them, that they were winning the war on the publicity front ... or maybe that's not the right term, the public relations front.

So the military front as long as they could hold their own, they were doing OK. I don't say this in denigration of anything our forces did. I mean the Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force ... I think everybody worked very hard and fought very hard, but I just felt there was ... Why are we doing this? What's the grand plan?

Producer: I guess what you said about Westmoreland ... That's why I think Cronkite came out with that. I mean, my goodness, do we know what we're doing? This is ... Westmoreland was supposed to be one of these huge, god warrior types, you know.

Mike: Again, when this major said to me, "General Westmoreland does not want to hear." I thought, "Well, that tells me something." I talked to Major Day about it after Westmoreland left with his staff and aides. I said, "Major, am I missing," I don't know if I used that term, "but he's saying he doesn't want to hear what we think." Major Day said, "He's the man in charge." It just was an eye-opening experience for me.

Producer: Was there a sense that maybe ...

Mike: I didn't have a sense of it, but again I was a second lieutenant with a rifle platoon. I was not wired in to the what was going on at home where the sort of what position Congress was taking or the politicians were. I would get newspapers from time to time, but I think at least for me and I think for a lot of younger people there, your horizon was very limited. Who knew what was going on back in Washington?

I do remember reading that while I was in Vietnam that either Lyndon Johnson or people at the White House were identifying the bombing targets for the Air

Force and the Navy. Again, I just remember thinking, "This is crazy to have people 12,000 miles away deciding hit this building but don't hit that building." I just ... It was sort of mind blowing.

Producer: No way to run a war.

Mike: No. If you have the assets, if you have these airplanes, Air Force planes and Navy planes off of the carriers, you tell them here's the mission. We want to destroy the manufacturing capacity of North Vietnam. Get it done. Now that may be over simplistic, but you don't send an order from 12,000 miles away saying get this building but don't get that building. You can't fight a war that ... at least I don't think you can fight a war that way.

Producer: It was at that point there wasn't ...

Mike: When I got home in May of '67, there was some anti-war activity, but it was not, certainly not what it became. It got a lot bigger, but I saw it. It wasn't that big of a deal at the time. It got bigger.

Producer: So how did being a ...

Mike: I think in a number of ways. It made me I think much more a matter-of-fact person because when you're commanding, particularly if you're under fire and you're trying to carry out an attack or defend a position, if you're under fire, you have to focus on what it is that needs to be done. Where to move your people, where to move your machine guns, how to hold this flank, how to protect your rear. You've got to stay focused on what it is you're battling, and if one of your men gets hit, you can't start thinking, "Geez, I'm really sorry that this man got hit." You've got to think in terms of, "How do we fill in that hole?" If it's a squad leader that's hit, who do I move up right away to become the squad leader? You can't worry about the guy who's been hit. At least for me I became a matter-of-fact person. I don't know if that's a good thing or bad thing.

I think for me it dulled some level of sensitivity. You just can't get wrapped up in things because you've got to perform. You've got to lead. You've got to make decisions, and so I think if you do that long enough, you lose some degree of sensitivity to what's going on. I think that's persistent with me. Maybe I would have turned out that way anyway. I don't know. I think it has made me ... I think the experience has made me more conscious of the contributions of the people ... I guess that people make. I saw in my platoon. I had all manner of people, many of whom I had never spoken to before, and I learned these are really great people. All kinds of backgrounds, all kinds of education, all sorts of worldviews about what's important in their life, and you get these people to work together. They teach you a great deal.

I have to say ... I had this ... Unfortunately he was killed ... this one marine, really a good guy, very enthusiastic about whatever he was doing. I forget at one point we were just having a chat about something. We were in the landing zone. I think we were in the landing zone because resupplies were coming in, and I think he was there to get the resupplies for his squad. That's my best recollection. He said, "Lieutenant Mike, how you think this is going to turn out?" I felt I can't tell him how I really feel about this because if I did that'd be a bad thing. I said, "I think we're going to be fine." He said, "If you think we're going to be fine, then we're going to be fine." He was killed a week later, very shortly after that interchange. That's always stuck with me.

I think that's how it's changed me as a person, very result oriented. I remember being taught in the Marines, "Don't confuse efforts with results." I've tried to live that way, and when people do things for me, I try to make clear I'm not interested in what you've done. I'm interested in what you've accomplished. Those are two different things. I think I got that from the Marines, and I think it was reinforced by Vietnam. Efforts and results are very different, and don't confuse them.

Producer: Do you think about the war very often in your life?

Mike: I think of my men every day, but the war itself, the fighting, the battles, the boredom, I really don't. Occasionally something will happen and it will trigger a memory or maybe just out of the blue something will start me thinking about it. I don't think ... I think about the people. My radio operator lives in San Diego, and I had to go to San Diego with some regularity on firm stuff. We had supper from time to time. That was sort of a good part of the experience, staying in touch. There were a few others that call, and we talk occasionally. That's good. That's good.

The war piece of it ... It was a great experience. I wouldn't trade it for a million dollars, but I'm not sure I'd say to somebody, "You ought to go through that yourself." Our youngest son was a marine pilot, served three combat tours in Afghanistan and Iraq. He was later killed while serving as a naval flight instructor. We talked after he got back ... He spent one of his tours ... The first tour in Iraq was a [inaudible 00:33:35] air controller. He was a pilot on the ground with a [inaudible 00:33:39]. He saw infantry combat.

When he got back we talked about it. We were sort of comparing his experience with mine. It was sort of interesting. Some of it was very different because the weapons are different. The communications are different. Sort of the underlying issues are the same. You deal with the same problems, getting your people to the right place at the right time, making sure people understand the orders. As

they always say, there's always the 10% that don't get the word and trying to reduce that 10% is ... an irreducible minimum below 10%.

But it was interesting talking to him because the weapons were different and all that, but sort of what you deal with on a day-to-day basis in infantry combat really a lot of the same stuff day-to-day just trying to get the job done, keeping your head down, getting your people home alive.

Producer: Did you ever have any interest in revisiting the country?

Mike: No. None. I have nothing against Vietnamese, but I think if I went it would bring back bad memories. I have some friends that have gone back and served in the service, but I think all but one of them did not serve in combat. They were in supply or logistics or something in the rear. They weren't involved in the day-to-day fighting. Maybe there were people who were involved who went back and were glad they did. I can't think what would be good for me in going back to those places I served or not. It wasn't beautiful so you're not looking at beautiful scenery. I did spend some time in the Imperial City in Hue. This was before the Tet Offensive, but most of that was destroyed during the Tet Offensive. That was a beautiful place, but that's gone. I just think walking around would bring back bad memories and sort of, "Yeah, I remember over there. That's where such-and-such happened."

It got to the point when we were doing patrols because we stayed in the same general area. I would tell a squad leader ... He'd have a map, but I didn't give him coordinates where to go. I'd say, "Go down to where we ran into x-y-z. Then I want you to go on up to where so-and-so happened and then over to some other place." He knew exactly where. So you thought in those terms. If I went back, I would look at it in those terms. That's where so-and-so stepped on a landmine. That's ... I don't need to be reminded of that experience. I'm sure there are a lot of combat veterans that have gone back. For them, that's fine, but I have no interest in going back.

Producer: Thank you very much for sharing your memories of Vietnam. Thank you for what you did.

Mike: Well, my pleasure to be here. I can't tell you it was my pleasure to have been there ... different time, different world. I do think though that at least for me I came out of it certainly a different person and I hope a better person for the experience. I don't know, but I'd like to think that's the case. Well, thank you for the opportunity.

Going home that if you stayed in you were coming back, and it wasn't as though we were sent there until the war was won the way it was in World War II in Europe and the Pacific. We were sent for a specific period of time. When that time was up, you went home, but if you stayed in, you knew, particularly if you had an infantry specialty, if that was your field, you knew that you'd be going back. Two tours as an infantry officer in Vietnam is you're tempting fate if you do that. I think ... It never occurred to me to stay in. I was never going to make it a career. There were some I know that were thinking about it and thought, "I don't want to come back here," so they got out and did something else with their lives.

Producer: Let's revisit that.

Mike: There were a couple of things. I mean the VC would pass through, and the villagers would just tell them. The marines were just here and this is what they did. This is how many they were and this is the kinds of weapons they were carrying. This is the direction they went when they left. So it was sort of instantaneous intelligence.

Something else that they did in our area ... the Vietnamese had water buffalo and they used them to plow in their fields for the rice paddies. For all of the water buffalo, there'd be a little boy sitting on top. He would be the ... would make the water buffalo go wherever he was supposed to. I can't remember if it was right or left, but if they were seated on the water buffalo and both their legs were off to the right side that would mean to a Vietcong who was looking from a distance that there were marines in the area. It was a tip off that we were around. So they wouldn't come out. They'd stay hidden in bunkers or wherever they were.

Then when we'd leave and were gone, the boy would put his legs on the left side of the water buffalo so if somebody saw him they would know it was safe to come out. What I did ... I wasn't the only one ... several of us did. We'd be in the village. The kid would be sitting on the water buffalo with his legs off to the right, clear sign that we were there. Then we'd leave. We'd make a big deal about leaving, heading down the trail, going off to another village, but I would leave a small fire team, three or four marines in a well-hidden place in the village. We'd go down the trail to the next village or wherever we were going.

The boy on the water buffalo would move his legs to the left side, a sign that it's now safe to come out. A couple of times they would do that, the Vietcong would come out of these underground bunkers or bomb shelters that the villagers had and then be surprised to see my marines there. That was not unusual. People ... There was communication between the civilians and the Vietcong all the time, but the legs on the water buffalo that was a tip off in our area. That means the

marines are around. You put them on the other side, the marines are not around. That's why ... you asked earlier ... one of the things Vietnam did to me was make me be observant. We started observing things, and it made a difference I think in some of the things we did.

Producer: One other follow-up question ...

Mike: I think there are two answers to that. I think a lot of them ... South Vietnamese not North Vietnamese that had come down but South Vietnamese did not like the Saigon government, did not like the way they were being treated. They saw us as ... We were the new French, the new occupying power. They didn't like us.

Secondly the Vietcong were very good in instilling discipline by fear and terror on villagers. They would come in. They would take ... they would tax the villagers on their ... They would harvest their rice. They would take some of it. If they thought somebody was cooperating too much with the Americans, they would kill them or threaten to kill them or threaten to kill their family. We weren't around all the time. The Vietcong were. Vietcong could turn up every night in the village, and we couldn't be in every village every night. They could by simple coercion get people to be cooperative.

We had instances when we'd have an interpreter with us talking to the villagers. When was the last time the Vietcong came through? Always the answer was, "Weeks ago," when you knew that they had been there the night before. It just ... They weren't going to ... The Vietnamese were not going to compromise themselves. I mean they were very loyal to the government of Saigon and very good people, but a lot of them were very scared of what the Vietcong not only could do but did do. There was really nothing we could do about that because we couldn't be all places at all times and stop all bad things from happening.

Producer: One last question, I mean probably ...

Mike: The concept wasn't that we would be in every village. That wasn't going to happen. But the concept was for important villages ... and for whatever reason this was deemed an important village, once we took it and really cleaned out what we thought was the Vietcong infrastructure in the village, then the South Vietnamese security forces, the PFs, the popular force, or the RFs, the regional force, they would move in and they would stay there. They would be a protective force in that village. They wouldn't be in every village, but they would be in what were considered to be important villages. For whatever reason, this village was thought important. They moved in this ... I forget which level of security force it was ... to be the security force for that village. They weren't going to be there for a week or 10 days. They were going to be there

permanently to provide security. In two weeks, they were gone. The Vietcong were back.

It was sort of wait a minute. How is this going to work? If we take the village and give it to them, and they just walk away. This can't work.

Producer: That was another. I like that answer was even better than what you mentioned earlier.