

# Randy Elliott, Army 101stAB, Tet

Randy Elliott: My name is Randy Elliott. R-A-N-D-Y-E-L-L-I-O-T-T. I served in Vietnam from 1967 from the Spring/April of '67 into the spring of '69. I served with both the 25th Infantry Division and the 101st Airborne. I was wounded and subsequently evacuated from Vietnam, but I had a very exciting and interesting career during that period of time.

I grew up in Florida near Daytona Beach and had a very interesting childhood, and then I got to do a lot of the things that most of us dream about and think about, hunting, fishing, playing football. I did go to Stetson University in De Land Florida, and I was the honor graduate from the ROTC course there. When I graduated I got to pick my first assignment, which was as a nuclear weapons officer in Germany. I deployed there, and about the time I got to Germany, things were heating up in Vietnam.

I came from a Southern family with a long military tradition and was quite patriotic at the time, somewhat more naïve that I hope I am now, but I was both somewhat naïve and very patriotic, and I wanted to serve. I wanted to go to Vietnam, and I wanted to fight that war and help the United States win it. I considered them the enemies of my country, and I felt it my duty to go there and fight.

I came back from Germany, joined the 101st Airborne, and we deployed to Vietnam. I was in the advanced party, and we got to a place just outside of Saigon called [inaudible 00:01:36]. That was our initial bed-down base, and when the entire battalion came in and we joined up, we started combat operations out of [inaudible 00:01:47], and then we went to another Vietnamese village about 20 miles further to the west of the Cambodian border called [inaudible 00:01:54].

Producer: Let me ... You're kind of racking through all these. Very early age, you wanted to become a soldier.

Randy Elliott: Yes.

Producer: When was that, and how did you know that?

Randy Elliott: Okay. Sorry, I didn't mean to race ahead like that. When I was about six or seven, it was Christmas time, and my father and his brother, my Uncle Steve, were in a room, and I remember there was a Christmas tree there, and Steve's son Max

and I were about the same age. We were playing on the floor, and my father and my uncle were listening the news. There was sometimes about the Berlin blockade and the Russians, and they were our enemy and all this kind of stuff.

My Uncle Steve, who I looked at as almost a godlike figure, I revered him very much, turned around and said very adamantly, "I guess we'll see what kind of men Randy and Max grow up to be because they're going to have to fight the Russians." That hit me like thunderbolt. I remember sitting there being absolutely shocked that I was going to be a soldier and fight the Russians. This is what my uncle said I was going to do.

To me, it was a lifetime mission, and there was just no question about it. I'm sure my uncle forgot about it five minutes later, and so did Max, but it was a lifetime mission for me, and it stuck in my mind, and from that moment on, I was destined to be in the army and to be in the infantry and to fight my country's enemies. That's ultimately how I wound up in Vietnam doing my country's bidding.

Producer: Did your family have a history of military service?

Randy Elliott: Yes, my great-great-grandfathers, both maternal and paternal, fought for the Confederacy. That's a story in and of its own. My stepfather fought in the Second World War. He was a B-51 pilot and got shot down over Italy and rescued. I do have something of a military history, but certainly, I think the way my family looked at involvement with the military was a very positive thing, something that was admirable, and something they encouraged me to do, so I never got any negative feedback of any kind, so after the pointed comments from my uncle, I was a dedicated soldier.

My feeling was always if you're going to do something, do it with the best, and the Airborne had the reputation of being hard charging, gung ho, all the clichés that you hear, but I knew they were effective troops, that they had good communications, that they usually trained harder than most infantry because they were used to being dropped in areas where they'd be surrounded and had to learn certain survival techniques and had to have very sound small-unit leadership, both at the junior officer and NCO level, and all of these things I found very interesting and admirable, so I wanted to go with the 101st and do the job that had to be done.

Producer: If you would, always reference the year when you arrived or the date. That's just really helpful for me. You get in with the 101st, and you request service in Vietnam, or you were ...

Randy Elliott: The 101st was deploying to Vietnam when I joined, and I knew the division commander, and as a lieutenant, I had just been promoted to captain, but as a junior officer, you had about 30 seconds with the division commander, which is just a quick formal interview. I knew him. He had forgotten me, of course. He asked me what I wanted to do in the division. I said, "Well, quite frankly, I'd like to be in the hardest fighting position you have available."

He said, "Well, the reconnaissance company just came open. The captain who was leading that was hurt in a jump, injured his back, and he's going to be out of action for a year, year and a half. Do you want to take that?"

I said, "Yes, sir, I'd be delighted to."

He said, "Do you know what you're getting into?"

Again, I said, "Yes, sir, and it's a job I look forward to." In fact, I had not a clue, but I did learn. It was a very difficult task that was in front of us.

Producer: How old were you at that point?

Randy Elliott: At that time, I was 26.

Producer: So you deploy. Now, since you're going to this third world country, you must have memories of when that plane arrived and what you experienced, what you saw, what you would eat, what you smelled. Tell me what it was like when you first set foot in Vietnam.

Randy Elliott: When the plane touched down ... Well, first, on the flight over, we flew over in a 747, and there were at least six or eight stewardesses service us Cokes and sandwiches all the way over, but there was a slight hesitation in everything they did because they knew that when we flew out, there wouldn't be so many of us. You could see a level of sadness in their eyes. I remember that very markedly.

When we got to Vietnam, and the doors opened on the airplane, I was almost, even though I'm from Florida, I was just overwhelmed by the heat, the humidity, and the smell. In Vietnam at that time – I don't know what they do now, and I don't care – but at that time, they used night soil extensively, human excrement,

for field fertilization, and that put a certain stench in the air, which most westerners are not used to.

Those three things hit me just like a wet blanket right in the face, and the other thing, once we got off the plane and we got in our jeeps and vehicles going to where we were going to bed down, you immediately, at least I immediately started perspiring, and everything stuck. My uniform stuck. Sand stuck to your arms. It was a condition that you would get used to over a period of time, but even when I left, things were still sticking because you're always perspiring, and it was just a condition of life.

The other thing, there were many other impressions that I got. The smallness of the people. We were veritable giants at over five-and-a-half feet tall usually, and they were quite diminutive, usually five-two, five-three, both women and men, and very uniform in their appearance in terms of clothes and color of hair and eyes and all the things that one would expect, but also, I notice that there were a lot of differences in their societal approach. Men could hold hands and it wasn't considered anything. Women would frequently have their arms around each other, just walking down the street.

It was a different kind of society. We didn't have much interaction with the Vietnamese per se, at least initially. We would see a few here and there, but that was all.

Producer: You arrive. I assumed you arrived at [inaudible 00:08:45] and you were basically, you spent some time there before you got sent off to where your base was going to be in the country?

Randy Elliott: We were at [inaudible 00:08:54] maybe an hour, just a quick processing at [inaudible 00:08:58] Air Base, and then we went straight to [inaudible 00:09:01], where our initial bed-down facilities had been set up for us. These consisted basically of general purpose tents that had been set up in a given area of [inaudible 00:09:09] base, and so we started familiarizing ourselves with what had to be done, and getting ready to receive the rest of the battalion.

Part of my mission was to take out an infantry patrol once we got into [inaudible 00:09:24], and this was my day two. They wanted all the unit officers and NCOs to get used to patrolling and doing the things that we'd be doing a lot of later on. You want to get your feet wet. So I took out my first patrol. We had gone maybe six miles outside of [inaudible 00:09:41], and we came up on a little ridge, a sandy ridge, which later turned out to be kind of unusual.

I didn't think too much of it, but I heard these annoying insects. I thought they were bees or hornets or something flying around, and I asked my first sergeant, "What the hell are these? What's going on here?"

He said, "Well, Captain, back in Korea, we used to call them bullets." It dawned on me that we were being shot at, and all I could think of saying or doing was, "Hit the ground," and we all did with the energy that novices would do it, and then we tried to organize return fire and so forth and take care of business. We later found out where they had fired at us from, but we had no casualties, and we found none on their side, so it was just a little bit of firing at us but no real danger. I was astonished that someone was actually firing at us. Someone was trying to kill me, and that was sort of an overwhelming emotion at the moment.

We faced two enemies. The Viet Cong, who we're the old longtime ... They had fought the French and their sons or whoever stayed with them and were now fighting the Americans. The Viet Cong were tough, hard men. They we're very, very good, fine light infantry, and I would put them in a category probably unsurpassed in that particular period of time. They didn't have artillery. They didn't have air strikes. They didn't have what we had in terms of resources, but they were excellent at doing what they did.

They had very few radios and communications, but did a lot by hand signals and preplanned attacks. There weren't many of them. They had to be very prudent with their use of manpower, and when they did have mortars and things like that, they had to be quite careful on how they used their resources.

The North Vietnamese Army, on the other hand, I never found very effective against us. They just simply didn't know their business as well as we did, and they tried to fight us on our terms, and that was a terrible mistake for them in terms of casualties and what it cost them. Sometimes, the two, like during the Tet Offensive, the two mixed, and the Viet Cong acted as their guides and what have you, and most of the Viet Cong were killed by the time the Tet Offensive was over. After that, we faced primarily the North Vietnamese army, which was a simpler task.

Producer: Your initial assignment was a recon unit. For those in the audience who don't exactly know what the job of a recon unit is, can you kind of summarize?

Randy Elliott: Sure. Reconnaissance units have several missions. The primary one is to provide intelligence to unit commanders. You want to find the enemy, where they are, how many of them are there, and what they're doing, where they're going, and

what kind of weapons they have, anything. Any tidbit of information you can find out about the enemy is going to be useful. You try and get that back, either by radio, by courier, or by the entire reconnaissance company or whatever size that unit might be at the time for that given mission. They come back and inform their superiors what is out there.

Reconnaissance work is very dangerous in that you're frequently out of any kind of supporting range. The artillery can't fire that far. The Air Force can get there on time. No other infantry units are around to give you any kind of hand. Reconnaissance units do all sorts of patrolling. You may go out from your own battalion or regiment three or five or 10, 15 miles sometimes just to see what's going on. They are all kinds of reconnaissance patrols. You can have combat reconnaissance patrols. You can have listening patrols. All kinds of different permutations there to try and figure out what the enemy is up to. It's risky business.

Producer: Your job is never to let, ideally, let the enemy know you're in the area, just to get in there, find out what he's doing, and get out. Of course, we all know in reality that doesn't always happen.

Randy Elliott: That's a big part of it. Secrecy is paramount. You want to go out and leave a very small signature and come back, but on a combat reconnaissance patrol, you want to go out, and you want to find the enemy. You want to keep him off balance. You want to kill as many of them as you can, hurt them so they react, they deploy, they start to move against you, and by then, you want to be well out of there and heading back to your own unit. There's a real mix of missions that a reconnaissance element like that gets.

Producer: It sounds like you're almost using the same tactical tactics that the Viet Cong used.

Randy Elliott: To a degree, that's true. You wanted to hit them as hard as you could, especially if they're in a stationary position, do damage, get all the intelligence you can, and come back.

Producer: So this is your first patrol. Your first contact was basically some bullets whizzing over your head. When did that thing start getting more interesting?

Randy Elliott: The rest of the battalion came in the following week, so we had all four companies. They had a weapons platoon, all the things that we would normally have in this particular battalion, and we started combat operations. Our first

operations, we deployed up to [inaudible 00:14:57], which was an old French, or still an active French Michelin rubber plantation. The troops called it The Rubber. A very dangerous place for us to operate because the trees there were planted in long, straight rows, which made it ideal for truck movement.

You could go to bed, or bed down in the evening, and by morning, they're could be two regiments 100 yards away because they could move that truck, and frequently, at least we think – couldn't prove it – but we think they had use of the French trucks that were in the Michelin plantation. It allowed them more mobility than they would normally have had.

Our first operation was to clear a small Vietnamese village called [inaudible 00:15:39] #13, which had something to do with the Michelin plantation, they numbered all the small villages, and as we approached [inaudible 00:15:48] #13, we took ground fire, and one of my men was hit in the upper part of his neck, just below the jawline, and he died about 15 minutes later.

We fired where we thought the machine gun fire was coming from and some AK fire, and after I guess about 15-20 minutes, we maneuvered around this particular small village and poised it, went in, and of course, there were maybe 30 or 40 Vietnamese women and our interpreters, Vietnamese interpreter, started questioning them. Of course, all their men were with the, the South Vietnamese army. They didn't know who fired what, but there were no men in the village who were with the Viet Cong or the North Vietnamese army, and it was all just some kind of mistake, and all of that. The [inaudible 00:16:40] village on an operation that counted for nothing, another young American died.

Producer: Doesn't wear uniforms, doesn't ... can easily blend in with the civilian population. I guess that summed it up for much of this war, didn't it?

Randy Elliott: Much of it, yes. There were some exceptions, like during the Tet offensive and the summer high point, which followed about six months later, but by and large, that characterized the war. It was a very difficult war, very hard, very painful for American troops to open fire on a Vietnamese village, knowing full well you're going to kill civilians. You just can't not. Yet, you're taking fire. You have to live, and you want to do your job and get out of there. It was very, very difficult from that particular perspective.

When I went through training, we were always training to fight the Russians in Central Europe, and we would be facing conventional armies with tanks and artillery and all that stuff. Vietnam was completely different, and you never

really knew exactly what you were going to face on any given operation. During the Tet Offensive, and I saw this, I mean, I saw this unfold.

These are not apocryphal stories or anything like that, but when we came into Saigon, a young boy, five or six years old, came out, and we'd been fighting in the area, and there was a lot of fire, buildings burning down, and the smell and one thing, and this young boy came up, and he had sort of a funny look on his face, and he opened his hand, and as he did, the pin flew off a grenade. So we now have a live grenade right there, he's 10 feet from us. What do you do?

That's the kind of thing that we faced on a daily basis, very hard on troops to control their emotions and their reactions, and especially after you've been fighting for a long period of time. It wears down your ability to maintain what I would call common sense and code of honor.

Producer: So the scenario you just told me about just begs the question, what did you do?

Randy Elliott: Shot him. Had no choice.

Producer: Did the grenade go off?

Randy Elliott: Yes.

Producer: Did it injure any of your men?

Randy Elliott: No, we all pulled back enough, but when the spoon flew off the grenade, all he had to do was run at us. We're 10 feet away, and it looked like he was going to start, but now that, he's a combatant, and there was nothing else we could do. Not pleasant memories.

Producer: This was all in the south near Saigon?

Randy Elliott: That would be the Tet Offensive, ye.

Producer: Oh, this was Tet Offensive.

Randy Elliott: Three Corps.

Producer: Oh, Three Corps.

Randy Elliott: Four Corps was in the Delta.

Producer: I see. Tell me, you were over there 13, 14 months.

Randy Elliott: Actually, 17.

Producer: 17 months. Was that two tours?

Randy Elliott: I was there for a full tour, and then I extended for a six-month period. You can do that, and I wanted to make sure that the men I went over with all came home, those that were still alive.

Producer: How did your unit make out overall?

Randy Elliott: Overall, I think we were extremely effective. We worked at our job. We did our best we could. The main goal, I think, of all of the men that I served with was to do their job and to come home alive. That was the principle goal. We knew early on that the war was not really what we thought it would be. We recognized ... I think most mention who were there recognized early on that we weren't going to win. Then it became a job of doing your job, staying alive, and getting home. That became the mission.

Producer: Did you sense that even though the politicians were decrying this war as a battle between essentially capitalism and communism, the whole domino theory that maybe once you got there you really realized you were just in the midst of a country's civil war.

Randy Elliott: Absolutely. It was clear even to the most unenlightened infantryman that we were in a civil war. The domino theory, other things like that, to the average grunt were just, to be perfectly honest, bullshit. I don't think the people in Washington and the massive headquarters in Saigon and Hawaii were evil people or bad people. I think they were good honest folks trying to do a job. They just didn't do it well enough. They didn't do their homework quite well enough, and they didn't ask the right questions and go to the right places.

If you wanted to find out what a war's all about, you need to go visit the infantrymen that are fighting it. We never saw Congressmen. Once in a while, we would see a staffer, and that was cause for great mirth and humor because of what they did. They were totally and completely unenlightened, and it became clear, at least it was obvious to us, that the people directing the war were trying to put an American template over something that just wouldn't fit. The cost of doing that was tremendous.

We had things that McNamara started like body count. Took the Vietnamese, and by that I mean the Viet Cong, about three minutes to figure out what we were doing. What are they going to do? Well, they're going to booby trap, ambush, and all that kind of stuff. Here you try to get something statistically important where you can do linear analysis, as in the Edsel from McNamara, and try and put that template on the battlefield. It doesn't work, and it cost a lot of young men their lives doing body counts. I think it's something that people like that should be ashamed of.

We did, I think, almost without exception know we were in a civil war, and like I said earlier, all we could do was try and survive.

Producer: We didn't have the fire in the belly to really stop this other part of their people from the north. Did you sense that we were, that it was sort of a futile, losing cause to help these folks, that this was just not going to go well and you left?

Randy Elliott: Ken, you're so right. It's hard to really do much take-off, because you really hit the nail on the head. We used to call them our kittens and their lions, and that, I think, really summed it up. What occurred, what happened, was that we came in with our tremendous firepower with all our capabilities, and I think we were largely at fault here. We pretty much brushed the South enemies aside and said, "We're going to take care of this for you."

That was a mistake. We should've let them take the lead role, and we should've helped them, operated with them, and everything else, but we came in and just overwhelmed them, and we built huge commissaries and PX's and large bases all over the country, and I think they were in such awe of our material wealth and our abilities that they said, "Wow, we'll just let these guys win." They really took a back seat to both on the fighting and intellectually and morally and every other way one can think of. When they did go on operations, they became so corrupt that they were an actual liability.

Then in this civil war, the communists were much more motivated. I mean, they had an absolute thing that they wanted to accomplish, and there was no questioning that. They would fight to the last man. The juxtaposition between North Vietnamese units, who will fight to the last man, and South Vietnamese units, who will surrender in aggregate. One side really wanted the ultimate goal more than the other.

Did we back the wrong side and other things like that? That's a difficult question, and I think we should've backed neither, to be honest with you. I think in a civil

war, one has to be very careful who you empower and how you support one side against the other. I think we went into it with a certain amount of reckless abandon, and we paid for it with almost 60,000 dead Americans.

Producer: I guess as you, when I think about the French. We saw what happened to the French, and I certainly am empathetic with the North because all they saw is another foreign country's troops are coming in to tell us how to run our country and our lives. I guess it's almost like did we learn anything from that prior conflict?

Of course, now, we could [inaudible 00:25:02], have we learned anything from Vietnam [inaudible 00:25:06] that were involved now, that America, it seems hard to believe that we are not learning from these conflicts.

Randy Elliott: By and large, I agree with what you're saying. The French experience in Vietnam, the way I think our politicians and military looked at it at the time was they didn't have what we have, and they had the entire country to deal with. Now we only have the south, so the job is half as big, and were 10 times or even more times than that powerful than the French, so it'll be a cakewalk for us. I think that's the wrong lesson to learn in a civil war, because when you're involved in that kind of thing, you really have to know. You have to understand your enemy very, very well.

I think we had some good intelligence on Ho Chi Minh and what his lieutenants were capable of. I think we didn't really get into it deeply enough and understand it. There were people, John Paul Vann and other men like that, who had a pretty good concept of what we could and should do, and they were largely ignored by the Johnson administration and prior to him the Kennedy administration. Then we had half a million troops in Vietnam in a struggle we probably should never have gotten into.

How do you extrapolate from that to today? It's not quite linear, but I think that we do have to learn lessons of the past, and I think getting involved in conflicts in places where we don't understand the local culture and the regional culture and the religion, especially in the Middle East with Sunni fighting Shia, and you have subsets of both of those in [inaudible 00:26:39] and other Arab tribes and ethnic groups fighting each other.

If we empower one side against the other, we're really playing a very dangerous game, and we have to know exactly what we're doing. Frequently, I think that just dropping bombs here and there doesn't do much good. We really have to

have a far better understanding of what we're doing before we go in and commit material and men and troops to these kinds of scenarios.

Producer: Using the jungle, the booby traps, etc., I see you came away with a heightened respect for this enemy after you had been a very short period of time.

Producer: This is true. I did ... When I left Vietnam, I had a high regard for the Viet Cong. I still had the little bastards, but I have a high regard for them. Let me give you an anecdote here. We did have a Congressional staffer come to ... I was with the 25th Infantry division at this time, and this is in early '68, and we'd been fighting in a place call the Little Red Schoolhouse, because there was a little red, it was actually a border post. It wasn't a schoolhouse, but it looked like one, so the troop named it the Little Red Schoolhouse.

We'd been fighting in the area, and the staffer came out to visit us, and there were about 10 or 15 dead Viet Cong troops who, or Viet Cong soldiers who had been killed the night before, and they were still in the area before we buried them. This guy looked at one of them and said, "Oh my God, look at that. They're cutting up American tires to use as shoes. They're literally on their last legs. They're not going to last much longer."

One of my troops turned around and he said, "Captain, they get 100,000 miles on those shoes." This sort of summed the Viet Cong ingenuity and the American ability to overlook their cleverness and their ability to improvise and do things that were really smart. They'd never had shoes before. We had actually given them their first pair of shoes. I found that whole little exchange there between the Congressional staffer and one of my troops to be quite insightful and interesting.

Yes, I did admire their ability to inflict pain on us. I admired it from their creativity, not from the fact that they did it. Everything from punji pits and booby traps to ambushes and the way they did their mortar fire, and they were just quite clever. They didn't have much, but they used it to inflict the maximum amount of damage that they could. Yeah, at the end, I had a pretty healthy respect for them.

Producer: Is there one contact with the enemy above any others that you remember?

Randy Elliott: Yes, I think the Tet Offensive, where we had a mix of both Viet Cong and North Vietnamese was probably the hardest fighting I was in during the war. We had been up on the Cambodian border, and we were actually trucked back. So many

aircraft had been destroyed and damaged that we didn't have enough helicopters to get us back.

We trucked back to Saigon, and we had a lot of fighting en route, but we got back into Saigon, a place that was an engineering compound called [inaudible 00:29:40], and we operated out of [inaudible 00:29:43] for the better part of two weeks. That fighting was extraordinarily intense in terms of large units. That went on for a long time. The first week of Tet we had 25,000 Americans killed, and while the next few weeks weren't as deadly, there was still very heavy fighting.

Probably the most poignant fighting from my own personal perspective was at a place [inaudible 00:30:11]. We had been able to bring in ... There was a shortage of helicopters, and we could only bring in two or three helicopters at a time. Instead of the entire battalion laagering up – that means camping up, making a circle – on this hilltop, we only had three companies. We didn't have [inaudible 00:30:28] platoon, and we were short a company, and we were short battalion headquarters, most of it. We had a little bit of it, but I would say around nine o'clock it had just gotten dark.

We heard the first military movements, and they have a very particular signature, [inaudible 00:30:47] being slammed home and things of that nature make a particular signature that you can identify. I had never heard this before or since, but I started hearing whistles, and I couldn't figure out what these whistles were from. I realized that they were blowing whistles to line up their men, and they were going to embarrass Johnson, who was going to Wake Island. They wanted to go overrun an American unit and kill the troops there as Johnson arrived at the Wake Island Conference.

We're in this position, we're undermanned, and we only have one battery of artillery within range. We have a flare, we had the artillery fire flare, and when the flare went off, I looked out and I saw this long, silver line, and it took me a few minutes to realize what it was. Those were bayonets, and they were fixed in Soviet style, and they were coming at us. They rolled over my sister company like a freaking tidal wave.

We were able to stabilize our position, and we called in air strikes and artillery right on our position. The fighting was desperate and heavy. They thought that we were just basically a company and hadn't gotten an entire three companies out there. That was something of a surprise for them. The casualties were quite heavy on their side.

To me, that was arguably the most fearful thing I experienced was just seeing those bayonets coming at us and realizing that here I am. The only thing between a bayonet and me is my field jacket, because I didn't always wear a flak jacket. That moment of fear before you can react and do anything, and you realize what's going to happen, and of course there was some hand-to-hand fighting, and that's the infantryman's ultimate nightmare. You have gone to Dante's lowest rung when you're in hand-to-hand combat.

That particular evening was, I think, the hardest for me in all of Vietnam.

Producer: Had you any clue that something like this was in the wind?

Randy Elliott: Well, as a captain in the infantry, I didn't have an overview that most people who were at much higher positions would have. What we knew, and I'm happy to share this with you, is that they weren't acting like they always did. Prior to that period of time, if we were in a firefight, they would do anything to get their wounded out. They would even pick up their spent brass shells, the brass casings, if they were there long enough. What kind of army does that?

They would save everything. They would save their weapons, their wounded, and their dead. Now, all of a sudden, we started having contact. They would leave machine guns and ammunition boxes full of ammo, and if one or two guys got hit and they were still alive, they would leave them. They didn't care. This was a new enemy, and we didn't know what to make of it. This had been going on for about two weeks, maybe three, as they were building up their forces to conduct the Tet Offensive.

The concept that they were using was to get their mass, get their units in position, and then have a go at the Americans. They didn't want to stop and get entangled with American units on the border or have their basic reserve units chopped to pieces before they even got to where they're going to fight. That, I would say, is a particularly Russian signature. The Russians always like to have a very large reserve that they could change the course of a battle or war by using their reserve at a right time. They did that at Moscow against the Germans.

Had we had more prescient people at various headquarters, that might have been picked up and at least certainly expected to some degree. The Communists in general, I think, had very low regard for casualties. That didn't really bother them very much. They always kept their eye on the ball, and that was victory in the South. If it cost a million men, so be it. They looked at it pretty much in that way.

I don't ... I think the actual Tet Offensive, the size of it and the scope of it, did take the American headquarters and most of us in the field by surprise. At least at my level, we knew something was different. We didn't know what. We didn't have a clue. We were alerted for Hamburger Hill, but we didn't actually go there, but we had the opportunity to visit many other places. We were alerted twice for Caisson.

Hamburger Hill was a very typical engagement. That one was bloody, but it was typical with the North Vietnamese because they brought quite a few resources to bear, and the idea was, we have them. We can fix them and fight them and destroy them on our part, and on their part, we can inflict more casualties on the Americans, make them tireder, and the more weeping mothers back in the US, the more likely we are to win this war,

Producer: I guess that particular battle, it ended up being debated in the Halls of Congress because as soon as we left, they took the hill again, and this whole concept of search and destroy and it's a war of attrition, that they'll take 10 losses to our single one, and somehow they will finally give up. That was such an unusual concept, I think, for the American that couldn't understand ... This must have frustrated you guys in the field enormously.

Randy Elliott: Enormously , always. We would go in and have a fight somewhere, usually inflicting far more casualties than we ever experienced, and then the guys would take out their Zippo lighters and burn down the huts, and we knew that by the time our last helicopter took off, they would start coming right back in. You could sometimes even see that happen as we left. You could see guys coming out of spider holes and what have you, coming back into the place we had just liberated.

Again, it was a very flawed policy even down to the tactical level. It should've been questioned time and time again, but I found that it never really was. It was just more of the same for the entire period of time I was there. That's why I say that the people who were directing the war should've done more homework. I really, I've always felt that we should've been supporting the South Vietnamese in these broader operations to really secure parts of the country. We secured nothing. At the Tet Offensive showed even Saigon wasn't secure, which was quite a weakness on their part.

Producer: I heard it so many times from people sitting in that chair. It was insane. We had one hand tied behind our back. It didn't make any sense.

Randy Elliott: I would say that that is a fairly accurate picture. In some combat operations in areas that were declared war zones, our hands were not tied. We could engage anybody, kill anybody that we thought was there because they were the enemy. There was no question about it. In the urban areas, rules of war did apply, and it's kind of like the scenario that the Israelis faced in Gaza. Do you bomb a village to save it? Do you kill everybody there to make them on your side? How do you approach this, especially when you're taking fire? It really focuses your attention on how you're going to conduct combat operations when people are trying to kill you.

It really puts the typical infantryman in an untenable position. He's making a political judgment that he shouldn't be asked to make. Had we structure our approach to combat operations differently, I think we would've had more success. Certainly, I think, if we had had better allies, we would've been in a better position, but there was a sanctuary in the north, and that's where the superpower conflict, I think, came into play.

Clearly, the North Vietnamese got plenty of support from the Russians and the Chinese, and it came down the Ho Chi Minh trail. We could find ammunition when we fought them that was not even a month old. You could tell by the date stamps on it. This isn't sometimes that they got when they were fighting the French. This is just coming down from somewhere. It came from a factory in [inaudible 00:39:03] or someplace like that in Russia, and you knew that they were getting pretty good supplies, pretty good level of supplies despite the efforts of the Air Force and special forces and everything else.

The stuff was still showing up on the battlefield in Three Corps and other places throughout the Vietnam. They did have the sanctuary that they would, and I think Johnson was afraid to do anything much more than the bombing campaign against North Vietnamese, certainly not into China or something like that. They would've probably kicked off a much larger conflict, and they didn't want to do that, and I don't blame them. It was very difficult situation for the average infantryman.

Producer: Did you have any faith in these psychological operations that would drop pamphlets or play music or run [inaudible 00:39:50] with loudspeakers, or was that just kind of, to the infantryman, that was just kind of an easy job for somebody else to be doing?

Randy Elliott: Actually, I think it was fairly effective. We got a lot of surrenders from both the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese side, and then they would go to

resettlement camps, and what the South did with them from that point on I don't know, but I don't think that they were very effective once they had surrendering troops from the other side, and I think that was a big weakness on their side. I think that the psychological operations campaigns were ... They weren't completely successful, but I think they did some pretty good work. Any man that surrenders is one you don't have to kill, or he did not have the opportunity to kill you, and that's always a net plus if you can get some to surrender.

The largest group I ever saw surrender was between 18 and 20, but that's a platoon, and if you can get quite a few of those to surrender, you've done a lot. I think one of the things that they did in the South was make people question what's going on. If I'm invited to the communist side, am I doing the right thing? It put a lot of doubt in South Vietnamese peoples' minds and made them gravitate more toward the government side, but I do think that the South Vietnamese government squandered that resource and didn't use it well.

Yes, I do think, when you're using B-52s, and don't get me wrong, I think the pilots and the crews and everything there that they did was a display of magnificent capability, but to use that incredible resource against a handful of guerrillas ... I'm not sure it's the right application. What I thought when we were going over there was that Airborne troops like we were, or on the 25th Infantry Division, would search out and find these people and take care of them rather than trying to basically obliterate much of the country.

I still have that feeling, I remember exactly. When I looked out of that helicopter window and saw this moonscape. Thousands of craters. What are we doing? How many bombs are we going to drop on this place? Does this make any sense? To me, it didn't, and that was my first sort of kick in the stomach on what we're doing in this country and what we're trying to do, and how we're approaching this whole struggle, and that was the first scenario that I saw that I didn't like. [Inaudible 00:42:17] that said that, I'm not sure, Colonel [inaudible 00:42:20], or somebody like that.

You really can't do that. It has never proven effective. The Germans and the British tried it, and we tried it. It just doesn't quite work. You still need a guy with a bayonet on the end of a rifle.

We were fighting in an area up near the Parrot's Beak, and we had pulled into a position where we were on a hilltop, and there was another hilltop beside us, which was slightly higher. At about 10:00 or 10:30 that night, we started

experiencing some very heavy fire from the other hill, and they had sent out something like a battalion to flank us on one side, and they were pressing against the company to my left, and so as we we're fighting these people, the only reserve I had was my company headquarters and half of a platoon. That was reserved for the battalion, and I got up to go ask the battalion commander if I should commit and keep that part of our perimeter strong, enough to keep them out, and the next thing I knew, I was in the 25th Medivac hospital heading for Japan.

They had fired a 116 millimeter recoilless rifle shell, American, captured from South Vietnamese. They were firing those into our position, and one glanced and went by my helmet and scalped out my helmet very well. It was a very good job doing that, but it also hit a tree a few feet behind me and detonated. I don't know any of this, but I was told by my first sergeant that I had blown through the air about 20 or 25 feet, and I landed on my jaw, and it broke my jaw in seven places, and I have permanent eye and ear damage. My skull was fractured, and I had 27 or 28 sutures where the scalping of the helmet was done, and I also had a total of 26 or 27 shrapnel pieces that had to be fished out.

That injured by back. My head was thrown over rather violently, so I had to ... Once I was glued back together, I had to go physical therapy, and that's what ultimately took me out.

Producer: That was at the end of the –

Randy Elliott: 17 months.

Producer: At the end of the extension?

Randy Elliott: No, that was 17 months. I had a month and a day to go.

Producer: Hmm.

Randy Elliott: I'd had a grenade fragment earlier, but it was nothing. They just fished that right out. I was back in action three days later.

Producer: Hmm.

Randy Elliott: I was in Japan nine-and-a-half weeks total, and then I was evacuated to Hawaii, [inaudible 00:44:54], in Hawaii [inaudible 00:44:56] Hospital there, and I was

there for almost a little over two months as well, and then I was evacuated to Walter Reed, and I was three months there in physical therapy.

Producer: Now, you obviously, you're aware that this was particularly [inaudible 00:45:11], this war was extremely controversial.

Randy Elliott: Yes.

Producer: Divisive in this country, the protests on both sides were huge. We were in a turmoil like we hadn't been in ...

Randy Elliott: Since the Civil War, yeah.

Producer: I understand that when you came back into San Francisco, you experienced some of this personally?

Randy Elliott: Yes.

Producer: What happened?

Randy Elliott: Well, during a period of time, when troops came back from Vietnam, they generally landed at San Francisco or Oakland Army Terminal International at the time. There was a long corridor that went between there and the domestic terminals. I was still a pretty dangerous man at the time, and out of the corner of my eye I noticed a big ... not a big, but a hairy hippy kind of guy. I could tell by his clothing and whatnot. I just took note.

It was just one of those things. I'm just coming back into the US, and I'm not quite used to everything yet. As he went by me, he had a Slurpee or a large Coke in a cup, and he threw it on me. I'm being assaulted, and I reacted accordingly. I did a leg lock on him, and arm under his chin, and I put his head in the ... I put him down hard, and I actually hurt him very badly. He wound up in the hospital, and I had to talk to a magistrate and all that kind of stuff.

I felt terrible about it, but it's just what happened. I reacted like I'd been trained and like I'd been doing for months, and he should've picked a different target, but I really felt terrible about that situation, and it made homecoming somewhat sadder for me than it was already.

Producer: Was the magistrate empathetic?

Randy Elliott: Very. He heard what had happened, and he said, "I'm sorry you didn't kill the son of a bitch."

I said, "Well, that wasn't my intent," and I wanted to go see him in the hospital and apologize but his family didn't want me to come around, so I didn't. That was the last I ever heard of it.

Producer: So, I suspect that after, of course, you saw what happened in Vietnam and [inaudible 00:47:26], I guess that had to be ... particularly since you had some people you lost, that must've been difficult to see those final images.

Randy Elliott: It was very difficult, very heart-wrenching, but I knew it was going to happen before I left. I admire Kissinger and what he did, but still, it was an American way of saying, "We made a mistake and we're getting out." I don't care how anyone dresses it up. I've heard other military men say that we didn't lose the war, and all this kind of stuff, that the politicians gave up certain things. All you have to do is ask yourself what flag flies over Saigon, and I don't want to beat this to death, but I think they kept they're eye on the ball better than we did.

The political talks that took place, I think, were good. They tried to stave off disaster, but you have to know who you're negotiating with. Those people were vicious and liars. They weren't going to hold up to anything that they said, and I think Kissinger in his honest moments – and I think he mostly honest moments – I think he knew that. It was a way to get out of Vietnam and save face. It that was the ultimate goal there.

Seeing the horrific American departure was heart-wrenching. For those of us who fought there and left blood there and left many honorable comrades there, it was more than heart-wrenching.

Producer: When you look back on this phase of your life, how do you regard it?

Randy Elliott: Difficult question. With a certain amount of regret at what happened. Certainly, at the lives lost, but a certain amount of pride. I think we did a fine job. We leaned on each other. We became very good friends and brothers in arms, as the saying goes, but I think that we did everything that the United States asked us to do and more, and about that, I'm very proud. I think I served my country, and I think I did a good job.

Producer: Would you ever visit Vietnam today?

Randy Elliott: No. No. I have no interest at all. Like I said, I still have ill will toward them, and it's a luxury I allow myself to have, not because I want to hate particular people but I fought them, and it's a luxury I earned. I don't have any desire to go back, and I don't think I ever will.

Producer: Randy, thank you for sharing your stories. Thank you for letting me [inaudible 00:50:03].

Randy Elliott: Thank you. Appreciate the opportunity, Ken.