

# Dr. Lee H. Strohl Oral History Interview

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**Hansley: This is the Pritzker Military Library Oral History program Stories of Service. I am Chris Hansley. Today is January 30<sup>th</sup> 2013. Today I am going to be interviewing Dr. Lee H. Strohl. He was a Battalion Surgeon on the DMZ in Vietnam [from February 1970 to February 1971, serving the U.S. Army Medical Corps].**

**Dr. Strohl, would you please tell us when and where you were born.**

Strohl: I was born in Chicago, Illinois on March 26<sup>th</sup>, 1941.

**Hansley: What was it like growing up in Chicago at that time?**

Strohl: Looking back, as we do at my age I was living in a fabulous time in Chicago. Things were available to everyone and it was a quiet time in our society and our country's history. It was not wartime when I was beginning to go to school in the late '40s and early '50s. There was no turmoil. President Eisenhower was a two-term president, things were peaceful, and it was an amazing place to live. There were an amazing amount of things to do, as we all know as Chicagoans, many of which still remain today; it was wonderful.

**Hansley: What was the neighborhood like that you grew up in, and how aware of WWII were you, because by the time it ended you were about five years old. And then you were 10 years old when the Korean War started. What was that like?**

Strohl: First of all, I grew up in Hyde Park, near the University [of Chicago]. Right in the middle of the University of Chicago. And the second question you asked can be brought into the first one, because how aware was I of WWII, I would say that [I was] acutely aware. A little history of my own history: when I was born, my mother died in childbirth so I never knew my mother because she died 23 hours after I was born. At the same time that was happening in 1941, the beginnings of the war rumblings had already started. I was born in March of '41 and Pearl Harbor was December 7<sup>th</sup> of '41. Obviously, I didn't know about that when I was nine months old. As I got older, up

to the point of about three years old, then I began to remember those were when memories start. Just adding it up, my father— who was all of a sudden a widower after my birth— had to scramble and figure out how I would be brought up because very shortly after that he went into the service. He was a doctor as well; he was a surgeon. He went into WWII in 1942 shortly after Pearl Harbor. So he had a one-year-old son, and I was brought up by his three sisters. I had three wonderful aunts who became my surrogate mothers; "mothers" plural, because they actually took care of me. Out of five children, [my father] was the only boy. So he had four sisters, three of which took care of me with their husbands and my cousins. So my point is without trying to be rambling here, I became very aware of WWII because they would say, "Your daddy is now here, and he's now there, in various [military] bases." He started out at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, but it was Wright-Patterson Field at that time, in Dayton, Ohio. One of my first remembrances is my aunt taking me to go visit my father in uniform at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. I must have been about three at that time, but I remember that. So obviously WWII was a big issue. Then [my aunts] said, "Now your daddy is over seas a year and now he's here and now he's there." He would send letters. He was very good at sending letters. Ultimately in 1945 after VE Day and VJ Day, he was discharged and came home. That would have been in early 1946. So basically for the first five years of my life I had no mother and no father. But [my aunts] took care of me and were very, very nurturing, wonderful. They became as close to me as anyone in my life other than my father. They are all deceased now but it formed me in such a way that they made my father, even though he was thousands of miles away, a very integral part of my family because they mentioned him all the time. I'm not sure if that answers that or not. Then when my father returned from WWII, he was a fully trained surgeon and he was a surgeon in WWII. But he had never entered practice because he went in after completing his medical training and had not started practice. So he came back to Chicago looking for an opportunity to join another surgeon, which occurred. He didn't know where he wanted to live with me as his five-year-old son. We ultimately, we being my father and me, moved... he was unmarried at the time, moved to Wilmette, IL, in the northern suburbs. So at age five I began nursery school and kindergarten up there. I don't want to ramble too long on this particular question. I could go on further into it.

**Hansley:**     **How aware of the Korean War were you? Did your dad have to go back in?**

**Strohl:**       No he did not. I was quite aware. At that point I was ten. I remember Inchon and the Chinese horde that they talked about on TV and radio

at that time. Meaning the Chinese coming across the DMZ and pushing towards Seoul, Korea. I remember it quite well.

**Hansley: What was it like growing up starting at age five in Wilmette and what school did you attend?**

Strohl: I only briefly attended school there because I was in kindergarten. It was the Central School to answer your question. The Central Elementary School I think. It is still there; the building is still there off Sheridan road—I don't remember the exact street. We drove by it a few years ago and I remember saying, "I remember that." My wife had never seen it, so I showed her. I didn't stay there long because my father was a surgeon, and in those days surgeons really did not belong to groups, including my father. Even though I said he was joining another man. Basically what they did was cover for each other when one was out of town. They had their own general surgical practice. A general surgeon is always on call, particularly when you are by yourself. Just like an obstetrician, particularly back in those days. Living in Wilmette and being on the staff at St. Luke's Hospital, not Presbyterian St. Luke's, but St. Luke's before the merger in 1954; which is another story. [St. Luke's] was on the south side of the Loop down at 1200 or 1100 South State or Michigan; I beg your pardon, on Michigan. So the point is that living in Wilmette turned out to be a poor decision, although my father didn't know that at the time before he made it. [...] By that time, we had a nanny who had been hired by my father who basically was doing all the house work and watching [over me]. She was a live-in nanny and her name was Helia. She became a very important part of my life. Helia became actually my surrogate mother when we couldn't go down and visit my aunts. My aunts didn't live in Chicago; they lived 180 miles south of Chicago in Paris, Illinois, which is where my father grew up and was brought up. So to go [and] see them was quite a drive, and [since] she didn't drive, it had to be my father taking us down there. I'm inter-mixing a lot of things here, but Helia and I would stay in the house and I would go to nursery school and kindergarten in Wilmette and my father would be gone 18 hours a day trying to develop a surgical practice right after the war without a wife. So he had a lot on his plate and he would get home many times at 8:30-9 o'clock at night almost after I've been in bed, in fact I would be in bed many times. At around two o'clock in the morning he would get a call [to do] an appendicitis [operation] and he didn't want to turn that down because he was trying to build a practice. The drive at that point, there was no Eden's Expressway. There was nothing, except for the outer drive. Going by the Baha'i Temple through Sheridan Road all the way down and meandering down. It was a pretty drive but not a very easy drive, particularly in the winter and the snow. So he'd go down and do an operation at two

in the morning. He might or might not come back because it would be another hour trip back. So it would be an hour down to go to the hospital do the surgery come back at five in the morning, turn around and go back down at seven in the morning for the next day's surgery. So you can begin to see it was not a good situation for my father. So shortly after settling in there, I think it was about a year we stayed in Wilmette, and I went to the Central School for part of first grade, maybe completed the year. I can't remember. That's really foggy for me, whether I completed the first year or not, but after that my father had begun looking for much closer areas to St. Luke's Hospital and the downtown. And that's where Hyde Park came in. He did have friends that said, "You should look at Hyde Park. It's a nice place to live; it's the University of Chicago. A lot of doctors live there so they don't have to drive from Northbrook or Lake Forest or whatever all along Sheridan Road, taking two hours each way, etc." That's how we ended up in Hyde Park. From that point forward until I left for college, I went through school in Hyde Park. I went both to the Lab School and then to the Harvard School for Boys which was part of the Private School League, where Leopold and Loeb—the famous killers of Bobby Franks—had gone. So the notoriety for that school, that was at 47th and Ellis. We lived in Hyde Park from 1947 or '[4]8 up through my departure for college and medical school. My parents lived there until my father's passing in 1973 and my step mother in 1996. My father ultimately remarried once we went to Hyde Park, a short, short time later. So Helia was no longer a part of my life. I remember that being traumatic because she was effectively my mother, basically.

**Hansley: When you were at the Lab School, which was it: high school or grade school?**

Strohl: No, grade school for me. I went through, let me think about this...I went through sixth grade, my father removed me because I was having too good a time over there. I was playing; I was not concentrating on my studies, let's put it that way. I enjoyed fun and he said, "You're not there to have fun." (laughing) "You're there to learn." As you can see he ran my life. He was the one who made every decision, period. In sixth grade I was transferred to the Harvard School for Boys, which was an all-boys school. It was very, very strict. Twenty to a class, and they kept very close tabs on you, and if you got out of line they took care of it. And that's what I needed. Looking back on it, I definitely needed that kind of atmosphere. Otherwise I would have goofed off too much and probably wouldn't have achieved very much because I was having too good a time.

**Hansley: When you were in high school did you participate in sports or clubs?**

Strohl: Yes, I did a lot. Basketball, football, tennis and golf were the sports. I was on the student council; president of the student council, president of my class; mostly that because the sports took up the majority of the free time.

**Hansley: Were you worried about being drafted after high school?**

Strohl: I don't know; it never entered my mind because I had a 2S deferment at that point.

**Hansley: You already had the deferment?**

Strohl: Yes. The law was what, at age 16 or 18, whatever. I had a selective service card which said, "Status: 2S." I remember that and I may have it back in my papers somewhere. But anyway, "2S" meant as long as you were a student you wouldn't be drafted. So that never entered my mind, not even in the least, no. And that was all the way through undergraduate and then medical school. I didn't even expect it.

**Hansley: Where did you attend college and medical school?**

Strohl: I went to Yale for both; Yale College and Yale University Medical School.

**Hansley: What degree did you pursue before being drafted?**

Strohl: Bachelor of Arts, BA in English at Yale.

**Hansley: Where were you when you heard about President Kennedy being assassinated?**

Strohl: I was a junior in college at Yale.

**Hansley: What was the reaction that you had, and those around you.**

Strohl: Shock, disbelief, terrible, upset and sadness. Because of how vital a person he was, and how upbeat the beginning of his administration was, with his ideas much like President Obama, and the new beginning and all those feelings. Just sorrow, somberness and sadness overwhelmed everything else.

**Hansley: When Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in April of '68.**

Strohl: I was one month away from graduating from medical school at that point. I was still in New Haven, Connecticut and very much the same

[feelings]. It was almost like a reprise of the situation when President Kennedy was assassinated; the somberness, the disbelief, the shock and anger for the taking of a life in such a way.

**Hansley: Where were you and when did you report to boot camp? How long after college?**

Strohl: Because I continued to get deferments, based on the selective service board in those days, maybe it still exists, [and] I don't know if you still have to tell them what you are doing. But, back then you had to maintain your deferment, I think, is the right word, you had to keep them updated on what and where you were doing. Upon graduation from undergraduate school at Yale I was accepted and went to [Yale] Medical School. So the draft board was kept apprised of that. I'm sure I remember sending in some sort of an update, maybe on an official piece of paper, I don't remember that part of it. They knew that I was in the profession track for becoming a doctor. So there was never any intercession on their part to draft me any sooner than upon graduation.

**Hansley: Basically when?**

Strohl: I graduated from undergraduate school in 1963, entered the Medical school and then graduated after doing five years rather than four, because I did a year of research, in 1968. [I]n July of 1968, I started my internship at Northwestern after graduating from Yale Medical School. That might sound like a surprise, because you'd think that the services at that point with Vietnam beginning to get heated up, would want each and every doctor they could get as soon as they could get them. That is true, however they would not take you as a doctor who had graduated until you had your internship because they did not want any doctors that were not licensed and you could not get a license without an internship. I was not eligible as far as the services were concerned until a year after graduation from medical school when I completed my internship which was a one-year from July to July. [I]n July of '69 I became "eligible." I received notice of induction about the last month or month and a half of my internship. So they were on it. They knew everything, the Pentagon I'm talking about, the Department of Defense medical division knew. They had life stories of every doctor and where they were in training throughout the country. I knew that and that's fine, but I mean they knew what was happening. [My] induction notice for reporting for active duty came in May of '69 and I finished [the internship] on June 30, [19]69. I went to July 1. That's how, and they still do with those dates now. I was told to report for duty and you brought up an interesting question which I haven't forgotten about: boot camp. I'll tell you about that. Doctors

throughout their careers at least, and I think I can speak for the other doctors as well, do not have a boot camp per se, you have a doctor's course which I did attend but that was not the boot camp that infantry and artillery and everybody else goes through.

**Hansley: Let me back up for just one thing. Before you left for boot camp, I still call it boot camp for the moment, did your dad or any of your uncles have any special advice just because of the fact that your dad had been in WWII and in combat?**

Strohl: My father; it's hard to answer that question because if you didn't know him, it's hard to explain. He was a man of few words. [H]e had plenty of emotions, but he didn't show them. He held them in to himself. He said, "I'm very proud of you. I want you to be careful. We will think of you," meaning my step mother and [him], "and keep us informed of what's going on and good luck." That was... which is fine, I don't have any problem of that as a father to a son because he didn't say, "Oh my God, I hope you're not in a bad situation..." Nothing, nothing like that from him; nothing, that would have been out of character. No, so he didn't give me any advice, no; about what to do or duck for bullets or whatever, no; if that's what you meant. I mean that in a positive way. [I]f he had done that, that would have been the first time in my life that he hadn't been no nonsense, This is the way it's going, you've been drafted and you are going to do this and as soon as you finish that you move on to the next step and so on. That's the way he was. So then I completed the internship and, to answer, back up for a minute about the boot camp, I was told to report to Fort Campbell, Kentucky. You've probably seen copies of orders people may have brought in. It says, "Report on such and such a day at 0800 hours Fort Campbell, Kentucky." I didn't even know where that was. But here came my orders, my official orders. And so I did. I reported for duty. I drove in in civilian clothes to Fort Campbell. In a way, looking back on the whole thing as a life experience, I must say that I give the military credit at least in this time of war for understanding that doctors are in a different path and they respected doctors. They did not denigrate them, they did not give us a hard time, because we had skills that they needed. I think they knew that, so therefore I arrived in civilian clothes, didn't know where to go, anything [and] nothing. It just said to report to Fort Campbell Army Hospital, Fort Campbell, Kentucky, 0800 hours on such and such July 1969. So I did, I went in to the hospital. I didn't know where to go, so it all started from there. They said, "Here, you come into the commander's office." There was a Colonel in there and the doctors in those positions were the full-time career officers. He was a Colonel, and he had been in for 20 years and he was now commander of this hospital which had 3,000 beds and it was an enormous place. It was a 40,000 acre base, home of the 101st

Airborne Division. I quickly learned a lot of things. You learn it on your own, because he gave me over to a Sergeant, I believe, who said, "Welcome and we'll do everything we can to make your time here as easy as possible." In the sense of learning things, he said, "You will not be going," to answer your question, "to any camp." Technically, in time of peace right now, a doctor going in to the military will go down to Fort Sam Houston, Texas which is where they have basic training [for doctors]. That's what they called it for doctors. And I think they still do have it there. I have a certificate that I passed the basic training course at Fort Sam Houston. But, ironically back in those days, they needed the doctors so badly in 1969. I'm sure it was in '68 or whatever, but this is how it happened to me. They needed you so badly they wanted you there in uniform right away and all the other stuff could fall in to place as it was going on in your time spent in the service. He handed me to a Sergeant; the Sergeant took me into a supply depot where he went down a long line. They handed out all our uniforms. You just walked down a line, you got your t-shirts, your underwear, your shirt, your regular shirts, your khakis, your dress pants and this and that and the other. He said, "Let me show you to the Bachelor's Officers Quarters." That is where I stayed. I was a bachelor. They had what they called the "BOQ" for the officers. I went over there and I got my room with a cot in it no bigger than this room and made that my place of living until I could get settled in. It wasn't until, fast forwarding, many months later, and I'll explain that as we go along, that I was given leave. You had to be given official leave to go to Fort Sam Houston, with orders, for basic training. That did not come until later in my career at Fort Sam. At Fort Campbell, the order came down for reporting to Fort Sam in November of that year. So I was at Fort Campbell for, what would that be, from the seventh month, for four months before going to basic training. By the time we went to basic training we'd already learned it all by diving in the pool. You had to learn it.

**Hansley: What were your responsibilities at Fort Campbell during those four months?**

Strohl: I was a Battalion Aid Station doctor; which means, General Medical Officer, that's what it was called, a GMO, 3100; which meant that you were the equivalent to the general practitioner in civilian life for the people for which I was responsible. That also meant taking care of raw recruits that were coming in. The base had 40,000 active duty troops on the base at that time. It was revved up and the biggest base in the country for Vietnam. They had 10,000 inductees coming every week. Every week, new ones, 10,000 from around the nation and 10,000 were being discharged, so it was like a revolving wheel after their eight weeks of basic training. We were responsible, we the



medical corps doctors there, were responsible for they put me out in a dispensary out in the base for people who had injuries while they were training or who might have twisted an ankle or couldn't go on their two mile run because they had blisters on their feet, that sort of thing. Pretty ordinary basic stuff and then in addition to that as is true in any big organization of doctors we had to also have emergency room duty as well after hours. For example, they kept a list in the hospital of the medical officer of the day and the surgical officer of the day for each month. You would look on there for the first of the month and figure out which days you were on duty, which meant that once you left your Battalion Aid Station and dispensary at four in the after or 4:30, which would be 1630 hours (somewhere around there), you would then report immediately for duty through the night to the emergency room on the base, which was an extremely busy place, like Cook County Hospital, because of 40,000 troops plus all the attendants, the wives and children and all the rest of that for the full-time people. It was a hopping, busy emergency room. And those were experiences that really were challenging to say the least. There's an opportunity to give you an example. Very shortly after I was given my uniforms and still wet behind the ears I did have duty assigned on this roster because I was told you check that roster and make sure you don't miss your duty time. It would certainly get you and you'd be in trouble. So we didn't. When you were assigned there the medical officer of the day and the surgical officer of the day, you never knew exactly who you were gonna be assigned with and it quickly became obvious that you would hope you would have other doctors who actually had patient experience. That is to say they knew what to do with people. For example, when you're in the military and you're a doctor, you're a doctor as they considered it. If you are a psychiatrist, you're a doctor, if you're a pathologist, you're a doctor, if you're a radiologist, [and] you're a doctor. Which is fine, they are doctors, but they were not good at taking care of lacerations, broken bones, injuries, etc. It was a very difficult situation to be in this emergency room responsible for upwards of 40,000 people with one other doctor when that doctor was a pathologist in prior life. This happened with great frequency and was horrific, because effectively what they would do is come to the people, and I was one of them and there were many others, too, who didn't know because we had training in dealing with injuries and so on. "How do I do this? What's the dosage for that and how much of this should I do?" You're effectively there by yourself if you were there with a psychiatrist. They didn't (laughing) interact well with the injuries. They didn't want to deal with them, women in labor because of the dependents there. Just seeing scenarios like that were frequent. So that was a large part of our duties which took up more challenge than the other ordinary early day stuff that went on during the day. The first night I was on duty, to get to the story, the

first night, the very first night I was assigned, we were on duty and I was apprehensive because of not knowing the rules and what went on. I knew the rules, but I didn't know what was going to happen then. First night, 40,000 people out there on this, what was it, 30,000 acre base, huge base, cuts the line between Kentucky and Tennessee. It's the only base in the United States that's in two states. Because it used to be a farm before the states existed and so when the military was given it by the family way, way back it split through the states. You would report, the hospital was in Kentucky but much of the rest of the base was in Tennessee (laughing) interesting enough. First night I was there they had walkie-talkies in those days when the emergency crews had to go out on the base. We were sitting there because it was fairly quiet at that point and first night, and all of the sudden the squawk box went on, because that is what they called it, and it was one of the emergency personnel in the red cross trucks that were out on the base saying, "We're bringing in an emergency and get ready because it's serious." The other doctor and said, "Well, can you give us more information." They said, "Yes, it's a suicide attempt." [It was my] first night there. Remember we were getting 10,000 recruits, remember Vietnam was very disagreeable for the country politically and everything else and there were a lot of draftees who didn't want to be in the draft, others went to Sweden, others went to Canada, etc. This was not WWII where everybody wanted to go; this was a different ball game. This sort of this went on then and much more in spades in Vietnam. I'll tell you later. We said, "What happened?" He said, "Well, this is a guy who just came in either today or yesterday." He had just been inducted; drafted, a raw guy, a private. I don't mean that in a derogatory way, I'm just explaining the circumstances. They said he slit, he cut his throat and then he slit both wrists. Somehow or another he was still able to able to do that and then he jumped off the second floor of his barracks.

**Hansley:**     **He really wanted not to be in the Army?**

**Strohl:**       Yes, that's right. If I were under oath I would say this is all truth, you would hardly believe it otherwise but it's the truth. I couldn't make this story up. Then they said, in addition to all that, I mentioned, he jumped off the barracks and we said, "Well, is he still alive?" And they said, "Amazingly, yes." They brought him in. It took [the ambulance] about 15 minutes because he was way out on the other side of the base. And he came and he was in very bad shape and immediately the operating room had been called. We called them because he was going to need major, major interventional help to see if we could keep him alive. Long story short, we stabilized him there in the emergency room and he was taken quickly with other personnel off to the operating room and we lost sight of him. Again, this was a vast place.

It was like Cook County [Hospital] only even bigger. We later learned, backing up. Before telling you that, as my responsibility, one of my responsibilities as medical officer of the day was to call the next of kin for anything that occurred like this. Not only mine, but anybody who was medical officer of the day. That was part of your responsibility. So I was given the information for this Private and he was from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I remember that very vividly. Why do I remember it? It comes up in the story. So I called the number that was there. A man answered and I said, "Good evening, is this Mr. So-and-So?" And he said, "No, this is Dr. So-and-So." He was a doctor. So I said to him, "Dr., this is Captain Strohl from the emergency room at Fort Campbell Army Hospital. I'm the medical officer of the day at the emergency room and I am sorry to tell you that your son, Bill (I'm making the name up) has tried to commit suicide and I'm reporting that so that you are aware of it." He said, "How bad is it?" Talking like a doctor. He didn't go, "Oh my God! Oh, this is awful! Oh this is terrible!" He acted like a doctor, because it was basically doctor-to-doctor, after you cut away the army. I told him what the circumstances were. He said, "Thank you for calling, I'll be right down." And [he] hung up. [That was the] last I heard of it. I never met the man, etc. but I vividly remember all of that. We later learned that he did survive and the first thing he said as he came out of surgery was, "Why did you save me?" That's what we were told. So he obviously did not... so I don't know if he's still alive, I have no idea. But that's the story. That was one of the most riveting things that happened while I was at Fort Campbell.

**Hansley: You've done your four months at Fort Campbell, [and] then you go to Fort Sam Houston.**

Strohl: Correct, I got orders to report to Fort Sam.

**Hansley: What was the training like down at Fort Sam Houston?**

Strohl: It was interesting because it was all doctors. They were there from all over the United States, and they were all Army doctors. That's where the Army, the Air Force had their own training centers. I'm sure the Navy did, too. The Marine doctors were all Navy doctors; they didn't have quote, end quote "Marine doctors." What was it like? It was like a big fraternity because everybody more or less knew, by the way as an aside. More or less you knew you didn't know it because you hadn't seen it in print yet, but once you were called for Fort Sam, that meant you were going to be going to Vietnam. Nobody as a doctor went to Fort Sam and then got sent back to the Pentagon or somewhere else. At least nobody we ever heard of. We were all down there knowing that at some time this wasn't, this fun experience of sitting in a

classroom and being told this is a .45 pistol and this is how you shoot it and going out on a shooting range and going out on a bivouac which were at night. They sent you out there with three other people and said, "Get home." And you had to use your compasses. And live fire sessions, so we did do it, but we didn't do it like the infantry. We didn't climb up walls and jump down into mud pits and all of that, but we had the Army's version of training medical officers so that they had quote, end quote, "passed basic training". What was it like? It was a pleasant time, I would say, basically. If one could have a pleasant time undergoing that. Everybody was friendly and they were talking from, "Where did you go to medical school?" and "Where are you from?" "I'm from Oregon" and "I'm from Florida" "I'm from Texas" or whatever. It was a big conglomeration of people there all of whom knew what was about to happen to them, but didn't ruminate about it. I don't remember anybody going, "Oh no." I don't remember any of that; I don't think there was any of that. Doctors by nature are pretty much, "Okay, this is pretty bad, but what are we going to do about it?" Not, "Oh, why is this happening to me?" it was nice, it was a good experience. That was eight weeks.

**Hansley: What weapons did they train you on, because obviously you were going into a combat zone even though you were a doctor, you didn't want to take a life but there is that kill or be killed...**

Strohl: Once we got there, just to flash ahead a minute, we were all issued .45 pistols [and] that we were told to carry them daily. They were, once you got up to your base, they were a little bit better. Army regulation was we were ordered, we were in a combat zone and it was dangerous and we had to have a pistol on our belt. What else did we [train on]? The M-16s were the other... so those two arms. The M-16, we basically fired out on the firing range. We did also with the .45s but less so. And that went for eight weeks. While we were there, this happened to everybody at some point in their eight weeks there. Further orders came down to, in my case and most others, report for shipping out to Vietnam. That was for, what was it, I'm trying to think now, February 1st. So we were there for, we went I think in October, or maybe it was November and that was eight weeks, so that took you into December then you were granted leave, I don't remember if it was 10 or 15 days. Anyway, there was a leave after Fort Sam and then report for overseas embarkation. In my case at Davis Air Force Base, outside of I think Sacramento, California, I had no clue where Davis Air Force Base (laughing) absolutely.

**Hansley: On that leave that you were able to take before being shipped out, what did you do, where did you go, how were you treated? Because during the Vietnam War, because it was not a war [that]**

**people wanted people to be in, and a lot of soldiers that indicated that they were mistreated by the public. Did you wear your uniform when you went home?**

Strohl: Yes, I wore it leaving the base to go home then once you were at home on leave you didn't have to wear it by regulation. I didn't wear it then, no, I was wearing civilian clothes. But to answer your question, I was in the camp of those who experienced a lot of negativity; not at that point but a year and a half later upon arriving back from Vietnam. What was my experience? It was mostly family. I didn't mix a whole lot with other people to my remembrance. It's kind of fuzzy now. I was more focused on having to show up [to] Davis Air Force Base.

**Hansley: From Davis Air Force Base, did they fly you over or did they put you on a ship.**

Strohl: No, flew.

**Hansley: What was it like going over and how long did it take?**

Strohl: It was interesting because, again, we were segregated off. This is the military and the way they did it at least in the Army and for them I give them great credit. All of the, when we arrived at Davis Air Force Base, when I got there... You got there on your own because you were on leave. I went, I liked trains, I used to love trains, [and] I still like trains. This is pre-Amtrak days, so I took the *California Zephyr* out of Dearborn Street Station and my father shook my hand and said, "Good bye and good luck." Much similar to what he said before when I was entering at Fort Campbell but that was about 11 months before, or ten and whatever; many months previous. So I took a two-day trip, got out to San Francisco and then, can't remember how I got there. Maybe there was a military bus from San Francisco out to Davis Air Force Base. Somehow I got to Davis Air Force Base, I don't remember. When I got there, of course we were in uniform all that whole time from then on. I walked in to this room where we were to meet and all of a sudden here were 250 maybe 300, about somewhere in that vicinity, doctors in full uniform all going on the same flight, all headed to Vietnam. My point is, I got off of my point, [and] my point is the military again showed us the opportunity or gave us the opportunity to go as a group of doctors rather than just putting you in a flight along with infantry and artillery and whatever. It was gracious. I'm sure they didn't think of it that way. It was done for efficiency but it was nice. Again you could talk to the other doctors. "Where have you been stationed up 'til now?" Because all of them had been [on] some other base; none had been at Fort Campbell where I was, but they were from all over the place. That was nice. It was a nice experience.

**Hansley:**      **Now, before Davis, where did you land in Vietnam? Were all the doctors who were dispersed...?**

Strohl:            That'll be a good story. It's worth telling. By the way, we went by way of Anchorage, Alaska and over because they couldn't make a flight, without refueling.

**Hansley:**      **What type of plane did you take?**

Strohl:            They use commercial airliners at that point because they didn't have enough of the C-130s or whatever they were using because they were all in combat. We flew over on *Flying Tiger Airlines*. Remember *Flying Tiger*? It was a freight airline; they had the tiger mouth painted on the front. It was a big Boeing jet, but it was *Flying Tiger Airlines*; which was leased to the military. They had the stewardesses there in their normal outfits, they weren't military stewardesses. We went in at Anchorage, and that was for about three or four hours in the middle of the night and then flew on. And then we landed at Tan Son Nhut Airbase in Saigon. I remember again, vividly my interest in "here we are" and looking around. The first thing that sticks in my mind... Tan Son Nhut, that's where all the upper-level Generals were stationed, Westmoreland, Abrams, etc. They had all the jeeps lined up along the tarmac where we landed with the various flag levels denoting who they were with the four-star flag flapping and then the three-star and the two-star and the one-star and so on. They were all lined up and they were all spit-shined like they had all been... and I'm sure they had some E-1 or E-2, and I don't mean that in a bad way, I really don't, but had them buffing. That was his job that was his assignment in Vietnam (laughing).

**Hansley:**      **How long did the flight take?**

Strohl:            It took 16 hours, but it was chopped up by Anchorage.

**Hansley:**      **You weren't quite as spit-polished as the Generals?**

Strohl:            Oh my goodness no, heavens no. The Generals weren't there; their vehicles were there so you knew they were around. This was the Headquarters of US Army Vietnam, right there at Tan Son Nhut. They had all... and the fighter jets were all lined up and down the tarmac that were taking off and whatever. It was a very impressive place to land. It looked like a stateside base as you can imagine. It was... that was where all the upper-level Generals were, so that would have been where McNamara would fly in as the Department of Defense. So you could imagine that things were on the up-and-up and looked

absolutely spotless. At the base of the, walking down the flight stairs of the plane, there was a Colonel from the Medical Service Corps (MSC). Those were the administrative people, they're not doctors, they're, I'm not sure if you're familiar with Medical Service Corps, but they are part of the Army and Navy structure. A relatively new development, maybe after WWII they knew they needed to get some administrative people in who weren't doctors so you wouldn't waste a doctors knowledge on sitting there pushing papers around. That's where the concept of developing this branch came in. The Military Service Corps, it would say that because they had the caduceus on their [uniform] and people would call them doctor and they didn't look carefully because ours are gold and theirs were silver. Someone without that knowledge would call them doctor and they weren't. It said "MSC" on their caduceus where it was twined in there. It was a nice, perfectly normal pleasant gentleman. He was a Colonel and he said, "Good morning, gentleman. Welcome to Vietnam." Remembering that all the people getting off this plane were all officers of different levels. I was a Captain, an O-3. Other doctors who were older or had been drafted out of their practices could have been a Major and some were Lieutenant Colonels. So that's why he didn't say, "Good morning, Captains, Majors." He said, "Good morning, gentlemen." He knew we were all doctors. He said, "Please follow me." He then proceeded to walk across the tarmac after we were getting off and he took us over to a building right next to the tarmac which was an old WWII Quonset hut which had been refurbished into a theater. When you walk in you had this structure with the curves [and] it was filled with seats. At the very front of the auditorium, the very front there was a very, very large map of Vietnam on the wall. On that map, it was just of Vietnam; North and South, and on that wall were all the major bases where the troops of the United States forces were stationed; in Hue and Cam Ranh Bay and Saigon and Phú Bai and Da Nang. There was a large table as we immediately entered the room and the Colonel went up to the front and he said, "Gentlemen, you'll find your orders right here on this table please pick up your individual orders, take them to a seat look through them as long as you wish. If you have any questions I'll be happy to answer them." We did what we were told. There was silence so we all found a seat, found our orders, sat down and began to look through where they were because they were fairly lengthy as they typically are. He said one other thing he said before, he said, "You will find on this map where you are going when you read your orders. When you see on your orders where it says you are going, you will look on the map and that'll tell you where you will be." We sat down, quiet, took about five minutes as people were carefully going through it and then after that you can begin to tell that most people had figured out or seen where they were going and they were kind of talking to the guy next to them saying, "Where are you going?" you

could hear a little undertone of talking. At that point I still had not succeeded in finding my duty station. Finally it was evident that everybody, it was not including me, he said, "Are there any questions?" and I had one, but I wasn't going to be the first to ask so I waited. There were no other questions. Finally I knew I had to... I said, I stood up and I said, "Colonel?" "Yes," he said, "Yes Captain what is it?" I said, "I do have a question." He said, "What is it?" business-like, but you know, he didn't have a lot of time to listen to people with questions I guess. I said, "If I understood you correctly you said on our orders we would see where we were going and then we could see the corresponding place on the map, I'm either missing it on the map or I don't see it. And he said, "What does it say on your orders, Captain?" I said, "It says Quang Tri, sir." And he said, "OH!" You remember in the old days they had pointers where you could pull them out. You would extend the pointer and it would go out to about that far? He had one of those right handy in his pocket. And he said, "Oh." (Making noise of pointer extending). He reached in his pocket (Making noise of pointer extending). And he said, "Its right here." And he pointed and there was no, I was correct it was not on the map. (Laughing) Said, "It's right here." And he was pointing to the DMZ. He said, "Any further questions?" and I said, "No sir, thank you." And sat down. He said, "Any further questions?" None. "Dismissed." As we were leaving this room and I was about the middle of it, people came up to me and they said, "You poor bastard. Good luck. See you in a year and stay..." and I had no clue I was so naïve I didn't know what in the heck they were talking about. As we filed out, some called me over and said, "I hope I see you next year." Because our tour of duty was a year. "I'll be interested to hear how your experience was." And then we all disappeared and went our own ways.

**Hansley: How long were you at Tan Son Nhut?**

Strohl: I must have left that day, because I never slept anywhere else. But you had to have orders and you went on first available flight with orders like that to get to your destination. Interesting question, I was going to mention it anyway. It took me 48 hours, 48 hours to get up to Quang Tri because it was so out of the way, so remote, so dangerous. They couldn't take typical airplanes that they used to take the other people where ever they were going because of the airfield and the danger of getting shot at. So as we went on these trips I did have to stay in some intermediate places on a base and I've forgotten their names to be honest because I had to go to sleep and have some food so they would say, "Okay we're going to stop here and then we'll wait for the next connection." And sometimes the weather would be bad, so it took 48 hours to get up there.



**Hansley: What type of transportation did they give you?**

Strohl: It was flying.

**Hansley: What were you in?**

Strohl: It was the two-engine version of the C-130 and I've heard different numbers. C-126, is that possible or? Okay, that's what it was then. It was a two-engine version. [T]hey couldn't land the four-engine version up there; the big ones; too small of an airport, too remote [and] too dangerous. That's one reason that got delayed; my trip got delayed, because it was hard to get up there and not many flights going up there in the first place. Second place they had to have the crack aircraft to get in there. That's how we eventually got up there. Have you heard the term PSP Landing Strip? PSP was an intertwined metal boards that were put together, like that, that the Air Force and the Seabees could put down on flat ground so that airplanes could land because the terrain was so bumpy and difficult to land on that they couldn't just simply bring a plane in and land it and they couldn't take a bulldozer and flatten it out. It was just inappropriate so they put down what they called, not only in Quang Tri but elsewhere, PSP Landing Strips. There was these intertwined metal strips that stretched across maybe a hundred yards wide, I don't know a hundred and fifty yards wide, and went for a quarter mile where ever they could get a clearing. That was the Quang Tri airport. When we landed the first time, I got used to it, but it made this horrendous noise because when the wheels came down across this PSP, it went (making a rumbling, landing sound) like that as they were landing so you didn't know what was going on. So I arrived in Quang Tri.

**Hansley: Were the hospitals still called M.A.S.H. units at the time or were they called field hospitals?**

Strohl: They were called field hospitals. At some point, Chris I don't know if you want it now or later, but that would be an interesting thing about my specific experience over there as opposed to just doctors in general. The field hospitals, it kind of ties into your question, they were put in secure areas. They were back. They were not up on the front lines. They didn't want to have some rocket from North Vietnam or whatever hit and destroy not only a valuable hospital but kill dozens upon dozens if not hundreds of individuals who were being hospitalized there. So those were further back. Da Nang was the first one in our area and that was, as you said, 130 miles or whatever you said; I didn't know the figure, but something like that.

**Hansley: What was your hospital called?**

Strohl: We didn't have a hospital; I had a Battalion Aid Station. I reported for duty and I reported to the headquarters. I was in the Headquarters [and] Headquarters Company, that's called HHC of the 1st Brigade of the 5th Infantry Division. I was... you see that red diamond over there? I was assigned to the 5th Infantry Division and I was the Battalion Surgeon with responsibility for all of the headquarters troops, headquarters being the compound which was the head of the entire 5th Infantry Division base up in Quang Tri as well as being a Battalion Surgeon to deal with injuries that were brought in from the Dustoff helicopters to our area to be stabilized only. We did not have more than just a very, I won't say crude, but very basic things and our job was to stabilize so the Hueys could take them back to the 95th EVAC in Da Nang. That was the closest. There were no M.A.S.H. units, there were no hospitals. In our area, I'm speaking now of only my area. It was too hostile, too dangerous. The only thing that was outside our base [was] the long range patrol, the LRRPs (Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol) people, the long range patrol. They went out on; they went individually out into the jungles at night. These were very interesting guys, they were the Rangers and they loved their work as I saw it in these patients the first thing they would do as came back into camp because they had to they were forced to is say, "How soon can I go back out, Doc?" they were, fascinating people. I'm jumping around here, but I was responsible for all of those people that were fanned out; the Huey pilots, the people who were actually on the firing line. There were no other doctors in the immediate area. There were medics, there were people out in the field who were medics, the Corpsman, but they were not doctors. As far as a medical corps officer, I've done the best I can through unofficial sources because I don't think the Army keeps records of this and if they did they probably have destroyed them. [I found out] about whether my duty station, the firebase on Camp Red Devil in Quang Tri, was the northern most location of a medical corps officer in the entire I Corps. I believe that that is the truth. I've done my homework to the best of my ability, I've talked to the line officers, the people in the 5th Infantry Division who weren't medical corps officers who were infantry and other wise and they say, "No, there were no doctors north of that." Going to North Vietnam, there were none to the west in Laos and Cambodia. What I would like to do is amplify on that subject that I was mentioning to you about the location of doctors and so on. The Army made every effort to keep the doctors back in safe areas that they could and that's understandable because that's where they could do the most good. There were precious few as far as I know who had actual combat situations on a daily basis if ever, because back in the 95th EVAC hospital they had a golf course, they had a beach. Many of the doctors experiences over there, and I'm not demograting them at all, were

completely and totally different than mine. They were more like a stateside experience. They had air conditioned hooch's. They had nice mess halls and officers clubs. None of which occurred up in our area. So there, even talking to other doctors who were in Vietnam, their experiences and mine would be on completely different levels. I think that as far as I can tell, there was no doctor stationed farther north than the position that I held and other doctors held in that location.

**Hansley:** **Basically you were the only doctor, or were there other doctors or were you on call basically 24 hours a day?**

Strohl: I was the only doctor responsible for that area. There were a few doctors that were farther south a few miles. But they had a different area of responsibility.

**Hansley:** **What other personnel were at that aid station to help you?**

Strohl: Corpsman and all the enlisted personnel. I had brought pictures for my interview to show that. There were fifteen, maybe a dozen and one Sergeant who was a career Sergeant who was my right-hand man; a black man, fabulous guy. He's the one that showed me the nuts and bolts of how to get organized. Not to be a doctor but to show you how a doctor needs to have these other things to help be a doctor there. And then I had Corpsman of two different levels. The army called the Corpsman who had an extra amount of training 91Cs because those Corpsmen were not the ordinary Corpsmen that had the six or eight week basic course. They also had a six-month course it would be comparable to Physicians Assistants or Nurses Practitioners nowadays. And they were very good, very knowledgeable and could be given responsibility, obviously it all came back to my shoulders if something went wrong, but I was able to delegate relatively significant things to them if we were busy and I couldn't be in three places at once.

**Hansley:** **They could do minor surgery's?**

Strohl: Yes, that is correct.

**Hansley:** **Set bones?**

Strohl: Never got to that level but surgery, lacerations, clean up shot, wounds, prepare them and at that point say, "What should we do next?" while I was doing something else. But they were very good at that and splinting and all those things.

**Hansley:** **How busy was this station?**

Strohl: It was a busy station during the day for very routine things. We had daily sick call. Because again, I was responsible for the entire base there, [this] included all the way up to the General commanding the base. I had a unique position in the sense that I was taking care of E-1s who were out in the fields all the way up to the Brigadier General, the One-Star General who was the commander of the base.

**Hansley: Do you remember who that was?**

Strohl: I do. It's on my Bronze Star right there. I met him, yes; John Hill, Brigadier General John G. Hill. I had met him before when he came in with a cough or something. When they come in, it's fairly interesting again. They come in as a patient to a doctor, not a General to a Captain. It's really interesting. They could've come in that way, but none of them ever did. They were very respectful of the doctors and I have an immense respect for the military I really do. Forget the political aspects of it, I'm talking about the people who were there and made it a career particularly in the combat areas. They were very forthright, honest, dedicated. They would do what they told you they were going to do. I had nothing but high praise for them. Sure I would have a general sitting or standing next to me telling me about his medical issues most of which were very minor, obviously they were not sent to the Corpsman for that. My First Sergeant would come in and he would say, "Doc, General Hill would like to see you, if you have a moment." I would say, "Of course." (Laughing)

**Hansley: You had mentioned before that you had been under daily attack.**

Strohl: Yes.

**Hansley: What kind of attack, how dangerous was it and how awful?**

Strohl: Daily, daily or nightly, mostly at night; mostly nightly. Virtually no night was without it. I'd like to tell a vignette I've told my wife and daughter about this issue because it speaks to what went on when I first arrived there. The first night I stayed there I was shown my quarters and settled in.

**Hansley: What were the quarters?**

Strohl: My quarters were about the size of this room. It was split in half with another, sharing it with (coughing) a lawyer on the other side, the Judge Advocate General Corps was on the other side of it. I remember getting my things set up and preparing my bed as best I could. We slept in poncho liners because that was about the only thing you

wanted to sleep in, it was so humid and sultry (coughing) nothing else would really work. I went to bed that night, first night there and I couldn't go to sleep. Not because of apprehension but because of the noise and the noise was deafening and it went on basically all night. I asked the next morning, "What the heck was going on last night?" And he said, "What are you talking about?" So I couldn't sleep because, and I was new to the base, everybody else had been there and I was talking to people at the mess hall, they were in the Infantry section. Again, I was in the medical corps so I didn't have anybody else to talk to. They said, "Well, what noise, what [noise] are you talking about?" I said, "Well all that, the WHOOM! WHOOM! Like that, all night long." They said, "Well, those are the 175s that are our perimeter which are firing into North Vietnam." And they said, "That's what tells them we mean business and that's what protects us." I said, "Oh, thank you." And that was about the end of the explanation. The point is that as the nights wore on, you began, as a human does, to consider that normal noise because they went on every single night until... There would be one exception that they wouldn't be going and that would be when they had sensed that there were intruders or infiltrators at our barbed wire enclosure. Because we had a compound here fully enclosed with barbed wire and booby trapped, but the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese would dig tunnels and try to go under it and get into the compound that way and in those days they only that, the only technology they had to detect people was the infrared as you probably heard of which I was told tells you that is something out there because of the heat in the bodies. The bodies make the infrared turn on. So they knew there was somebody out there. When that was, that was from the guard towers and search lights and also they would have, other vets may have talked to you, but what I called the parachutes, they would shoot the little parachutes about so big up into the air which had flares on the bottom and they would slowly come down it would take them 15-20 minutes to come down because they would shoot them so high and they would be as bright as this room if not brighter from those flares so that they could be looking out there. It was like daylight. You could have a baseball game out there it was so bright. So all the sound would stop, so it would be deathly quiet and that would make you sit up in bed because you knew that was something bad. And then the flares would go up. So the irony is, the first night I got there, the noise was deafening and I thought that was bad, and then as time went by you knew when it, that was like a, it became like a lullaby when you would go to bed and you would hear that and it would go through the night and you knew you had a good night because nobody was trying to get through. But on many nights, maybe 30-40 percent of the time the noise would stop and you knew that was trouble. It might be two hours before they would start up again and you would hear the machine guns that are periphery firing

away at what they detected in the infrared and then eventually they would all stop. And never actually got in our base, but they were certainly making a good effort to. And so it went from the noise keeping you awake to the noise putting you to sleep. Because you knew you were safe when the noise was there. I've always enjoyed the irony of that.

**Hansley:** **That's similar to living close to O'Hare Airport.**

Strohl: Yes.

**Hansley:** **And you sleep through, there's a strike and there's no jets going, it's two in the morning and you are wondering, "What's going wrong?"**

Strohl: Exactly right. That's exactly right. It's a good equivalent.

**Hansley:** **Yes.**

Strohl: I called it a symphony, a lullaby, whatever. Because I knew they were out there helping us.

**Hansley:** **What was your personal philosophy about the enemy that you faced based on the fact that you were a doctor and you're trying to save lives? Were you angry toward the enemy because of the devastating wounds and death that you had to deal with on a daily basis? Has that philosophy changed over time?**

Strohl: It's interesting; I'll give you a general answer and then a personal answer. I would say that in general doctors either are trained or inherently understand that politics is a different thing than being a doctor and they are two separate things. I can't speak for all other doctors but what I'm saying there is I never wasted time, because that's what I consider it to be, wasted time considering anger or hate toward nameless faceless people out there trying to kill us because really that's not the way I think or maybe doctors in general. I'll speak for myself, I never thought in those terms whatsoever, never passed my mind. It was taken a day at a time and live through it, partly maybe from my father's way of thinking or the way he behaved and I wasn't consciously trying to follow that. I was certainly did not have any thoughts along the lines you are asking me about.

**Hansley:** **Because of the devastating wounds and the death?**

Strohl: You can't not help but be distraught and saddened by the carnage that went on. There's no doubt about that. But again, that gets back to

medical training at least for me it did because going back to medical school now, I remember vividly again one of the first days when we were young medical students going into emergency room duty and the older doctors who were already interns and residents teaching us, because we would go, "Oh my God, look at that automobile accident." Or, "Look at that shotgun..." Or "How do you deal with this severed leg from a motorcycle getting in an accident cutting a guy's leg?" And they'd say, "Well, we do our best of course, to..." And this is what gets a lot of the public upset about doctors because they feel like they have no feelings but, the answer to the question, getting back, it's controversial, but the way the doctors were thinking about it is, they said, "This is yet another patient who drastically needs help and we will do our very best to save their lives." But, here comes the message that they gave us: "If you pour your heart out to each and every person that comes in, and just get frazzled or distraught, number one, you'll lose your clear thinking and number two you will end up draining a well of reservoir of empathy that you have and pretty soon it will be empty." And so I think that was good advice and I think it's true because it's not a bottomless pit for any human as far as... Think of the Holocaust, if you got upset that someone about the first 50 bodies they saw, after the 50-thousandth body how did they feel? After the 100-thousandth? No, I didn't think along those terms. I didn't think about who had killed this person or who had done that. One of the duties we had flashing back to one of my other duties was to go out and pronounce people dead. In one night I had to go out after an infiltration attempt on the following morning they found that they couldn't find that night was a Lieutenant who had been walking periphery and stepped on a landmine and was killed by one of our landmines. Those things stick in my mind because that was a needless type of thing which happened and was very sad. I had befriended him; he was an infantry officer from Texas. A very pleasant guy, eh and I got along well, sit and eat breakfast together one morning he was gone from an accident like that, not from friendly fire. Not from enemy fire either but just stepping on a landmine.

**Hansley:** **What was the interaction between the combat forces coming in and your medical corps?**

**Strohl:** Very favorable. They knew we could help them. They knew we were there to help them. Never had any back talk, or disagreeable behavior from the ones that were out in harm's way, in dangers way. Many of them had the attitude as I mentioned, "Doc, how soon can I go back out?" Those were really very driven soldiers. Very driven and they didn't feel that they were fulfilling their duty or their desire unless they were out there in harm's way. Others were neutral, didn't mention it or not mention it. Others who were in the back areas, I

think some of them felt embarrassed they weren't out there but others didn't say anything. And then we had, in any organization, we had the gold-bickers', the men who didn't want to do their jobs or didn't want to go out even though they were in these units. Not everybody had that attitude. There were some that didn't and we would see them as well because they would be trying to pull the wool over our eyes, so to speak, to put it in a nice way. It didn't work because we had ways to figure out if they were gold-bricking, as the old term is, or not. They didn't like to be told they were ready for duty and that gets into what you remember from other evens I'm sure about the fragging of their sergeants, the fragging of their officers. You know the term "fragging"? Where they try to blow them up, kill them. I don't know if you've run into that, but that happened, from other entities. That happened; those had to be court martialed. That was the duty of the Medical Corps as well, the doctor in charge to go and pronounce these people fit mentally for court martial. And for those, I'm kind of going off on a tangent, but it sort of answers this. For those people they were held in the brig, temporary brig up there. Whenever that was assignment for me to go and pronounce these people fit or unfit, I never had to say unfit, because they really were all just trying to pretend they were unfit. An MP (Military Police) would always assist me and go with me with his gun drawn because those people were dangerous and they would do anything to get out of the brig. They were then sent back and brought to the states and court martialed or whatever and we never saw them again. We had to go see those people and they were not friendly. And bringing into reality, we had all the black power movements and all the things going on in the states at that time and many of the troops, a high percentage of the draftees were blacks and many of them were there because they, not only in Quang Tri, but throughout the Army they were there because they had committed a, not a felony but a misdemeanor-type crime in the states and they were brought in front of a judge. Back in the '60s when I was there and the judge would say to them, "You have two options, you are either going to jail tomorrow morning or you're going in the army today." And 99% of them would take the army. Those people ended up being in everybody's units and they were poison, they were bad, they weren't all black by any means, but there [were] a high percentage of them. They behaved in the army, no differently than they did in society. They were trouble makers, they tried to frag their sergeants, [and] they shot off their toes so that they would be unfit for duty. They still got court martialed for that because that was called destroying government property. They didn't know that, but that's what happened to them. So these issues were kind of side issues over and above all the other things we were doing and they were the more unpleasant side.



**Hansley:** You said some of the men who were probably not too badly injured wanted to know when they could go back. In your compound, Quang Tri, did you any, let's say, short-term recovery area if they needed to stay a day or two?

**Strohl:** Yes, we called it our holding unit. And we could make those decisions and those guys were ready to sprint out the first day but you had to use your judgment on that. If I can give you another little vignette, I would appreciate it because I think it speaks to my experience over there. Backing way up, when I got the draft notice to go in, in July of '69, the Army, sorry, all of the service branches in the Medical Corps had a plan back then called the Berry Plan, B-E-R-R-Y, as in raspberry, strawberry, etc. It was named after Doctor Berry who was a career medical officer who designed a program for doctors in the military to be allowed to be deferred for further training. Now we're backing up here, for further training and go in and sign an agreement that you will go in upon completion of your training as a fully trained specialist. Because not all doctors in the service were the ones like me who had just finished their internship but had not yet gone on to post graduate training. So the orthopedic surgeons, the regular general surgeons, the neurosurgeons, the... what else did they have? Mostly the surgeons [and] a few of the psychiatrists. When the Army or Navy or whatever needed slots for those people over in Vietnam, they had to have fully trained ones, you can't have a surgeon operating on you if he hasn't had surgical training in the states. So they did a lot of deferment of a specific type number that only the Pentagon knew. For deferment and then you would go in as a Major instead of a Captain because the Army gives you credit for your professional training as time in service. There were those people who got deferred that went over at a higher level, as I was saying before, the Majors and the Lieutenant Colonels. I took my little number in the hat as did all the doctors because everybody wanted to be deferred and go over as a [medical] specialist, as opposed as a general medical officer, [who] is what I was; a Battalion Surgeon, etc., a Combat Surgeon. Very few got it and that was up to the Pentagon only. So I put my thing in, didn't get it, didn't get deferred obviously. I think 90% of the doctors didn't. I was over there, here's how it ties into what, where we are in the story now. I was already accepted into a residency at the time of my induction at the University of Michigan in dermatology which is what I spent 35 years doing in my career after getting out of the Army. I'd been accepted for July the first, obviously I wasn't going so I had to call the chief of the department at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and say, "Doctor Harold, I'm sorry to tell you I will not be able to come on July 1st because I've been drafted and I am going to Fort Campbell, Kentucky and I will be in the Army for two years." He then had the option, and bless him for being a wonderful person, he's deceased

now. I respect his, the way he handled it. He'd had other doctors; most of the doctors going through had been through this whole routine. So what he was hearing from me was not new because almost everybody had been drafted. Almost all doctors in that era got drafted whether or not they got the Berry Plan Deferment was a separate issue. But they'd all been drafted. So all five of us, when I went back to training two years later had been veterans, we were all... One was in the Navy, one Marines one Air Force me and somebody else. Some other... two in the Army I guess. He said, "Don't worry; you have a position open and ready for you in two years, good luck." He did not have to say that. He could've said, "Well, thank you for calling, goodbye." Or whatever, he didn't do that because that would have meant I would have had to reapply in two years and who knows, you can't reapply from Vietnam very well, and on and on. So I had the pressure taken off in that sense knowing that I would be able to go back with just a two year hiatus to the training that I had already been accepted in to, thanks to Doctor Harold. He was the one that said up or down. So when I got in the service I began to tell other people, they said, "Well, did you get deferred?" "No." and blah, blah, blah. "What are you going in to?" I said, "Dermatology." "Oh," they said, "Oh, they're going to need that in and they'll love that in Vietnam, they'll love that." And I said, "Well, how will they know? Because I am just a Battalion Surgeon, I'm a Combat Surgeon?" and they said, "Well, when you get over there you tell everybody in the chain of command that your special interest is dermatology. You will then find that they will," he said... these were doctors talking to me here, stateside, they said, "Most of the guys over there don't want to fool with skin diseases anyway and they'll be happy as clams that somebody is willing to do it and wants to do it." It turned out to be exactly the case. I got over there and I said, "Well, by the way, if there are any skin problems that come up that are out in the field, you know, or even outside our area of operations, our AO..." meaning other units that don't belong to us, "Want to send them, I'll take them." And so over time, as the months went by, I got busier and busier as a side thing setting up a one day a week clinic for skin problems only and there were lots of them. The trench foot and a whole, whole... there were just thousands of them. That got to be a very busy sideline and the reason I bring that up is as part of that I requested and was granted the approval for this holding unit which was started originally because we had so many with skin diseases that were coming in. For example, prickly heat might not sound like much but it's bad because it can push your temperature up to 103-104, you can have a seizure and die out in the fields. The Corpsmen knew that so they would send these people in and I would say, "Well we need somewhere to keep these people cool." And mind you we were out in the middle of nowhere as you know. And I said, "Could we possibly get a prefab unit with some big fans like you see at a livestock fair in the

summer to use on these people." They did all that for me and so we had these, we had like in the old movies, like the M.A.S.H. units that maybe we didn't have a M.A.S.H. unit, but we had a building like it with beds lined up on two sides and you could walk down the middle. We had quite a few of these troops in at any one given time for clearing their prickly heat because basically the treatment for it is to strip them off and have only their skivvies on and blow cold air on them and keep them cool and then the body heals itself. It's not due to medication; you don't give them pills or shots. That doesn't do any good. So they allowed me to do that so that's where the holding unit came and we were able to put other people in. It wasn't a part of the official group out there but they allowed me to do that and that became also used for other injuries and so on.

**Hansley:** **Going on a little bit of a different track, but still where we are at, did you meet or work with any foreign military personnel? What was your opinion of them and if they were South Vietnamese, did you feel they were fighting for their country or were they leaving it up to the American troops?**

**Strohl:** Good question and due to the isolation of the medical groups again I did not meet with, I did meet with Vietnamese officers but they were doctors also. So again, the answer is yes I did, but I don't think maybe that was the kind of question you were thinking about. I didn't meet any combat Vietnamese or anything like that. That was not anything I...

**Hansley:** **They weren't coming to your station...**

**Strohl:** No, no. They had their own, I think out wherever they were. In fact, I think we were not approved to give care to them. I don't know that for a fact, I shouldn't speculate on that. But no, not one time did they come in the compound. When we went back to our medical meetings in Da Nang once a month, there were Vietnamese doctors there that were brought in just to have camaraderie and we interacted with them at one time, those times. I did attend a Vietnamese wedding which was strictly off limits and was not supposed to be done in a village outside our base because I was invited by a Vietnamese doctor to his wedding and his wife. That was quite an experience. It was a long table and it was a day long wedding. Went out there with my, protection, you know, MPs and so on. I did go out and I did interact in that way. One interesting thing is we really couldn't converse very well. He didn't know very much English I certainly didn't know any Vietnamese but we both knew some French. Because the professionals in Vietnam due to the French colonialism going back to the 1860s, I think is when it started, they were all taught in French.

And so we could speak a fair amount in French. I knew enough that we could talk and I always thought that was an interesting little side light. Neither of us knew the others language but we could speak in a third language (laughing).

**Hansley: Did you ever treat civilians from the area who may have been injured or any enemy that may have come in as a prisoner?**

Strohl: Interesting question. The answer is yes and here's why. As part of, much like what went on in Iraq where they tried to reach out into the public to do, what's the right word, warm fuzzy programs to show that the Americans are there to help. They had one back then called civil action program and they call it MEDCAP, Medical Civil Action Program, MEDCAP. We were authorized by the Department of the Army, we being the medical corps, to go out in to the villages with military escort. This was official, so we went out with a Red Cross truck out in there followed by, proceeded by, [and] followed tanks and MPs, and so on. If we got shot at, at least we could try to defend ourselves. We never did get shot at but you never knew out there. We would go to the villages and we would see people that had been brought in and lined up to see the doctors, doctor in my case and the Corpsman. My Corpsman went for various sundry medical issues. You never knew who you were talking to, to answer your question. You never knew if that guy was a Vietcong at night and in the day he lived in the village. You never knew that, it was impossible to tell. You had to do everything through a translator. In other words, here would be sitting this guy in his kimono or the woman with their hats on and you'd say to the translator, "Does she have a lot of pain?" Or whatever and he would say, he would give you an introduction. "This lady has a headache." Or "This lady has 'X', sore knee," whatever it would be. Then you'd have, everything had to go through the translator so obviously we had no way of knowing was the translator telling them exactly what we ask them or if he understood what we were telling him to ask her. Who knew? Because when it goes around in a circle like that, particularly with medical terminology and even if you're trying to keep it simple, you never know. We often said to each other back at the base, we were probably treating a guy, making him better for whatever it was that's going to come around our base tonight and try to get in and kill us.

**Hansley: Yes, I think it did.**

Strohl: Yes we went out and... now, the other soldiers were forbidden to do that. They couldn't go into the villages. The only reasons we were... and I did that one time for the wedding and got away with it, because that was not authorized, but anyway, the actual combat soldiers that

were in no way they were told they could do that. But this was an authorized program from higher up in Washington. On a weekly basis, we did it weekly.

**Hansley: Compare your duties at Fort Campbell to Quang Tri. Were you prepared for those differences and did you ever feel overwhelmed because you were the only doctor there, who were you able to talk to if you needed a little bit of moral support just to blow off some steam?**

Strohl: That's a pretty involved question. Can we stop for a second here, please?

**Hansley: Back from our break. My last question was the differences between your duties at Fort Campbell and Quang Tri [was] definitely different. Did you ever become overwhelmed and because you were the only doctor there, who could you talk to [in order] to let off some steam?**

Strohl: Yes we were overwhelmed at times. Again, without trying to sound repetitive I think because of a doctor's training, throughout, I'm speaking of all doctors now. Overwhelming is a fact but it's also a challenge. In other words, you don't let it literally overwhelm you or your ability to think or perform is worthless and that does no one any good. The experiences were different. At Fort Campbell, we had specialists there, of course. They were on call, easily available. Situations could be handled whatever nature came up including suicide attempts. Where we were up there [Quang Tri] sometimes the situations were dire and immediate. Dustoff was the best thing to do and trying to stabilize and that didn't always happen because the pilots couldn't always get in due to lousy weather, terrible weather, whatever. So we had to do the best that we could under the circumstances. Did I feel the need to blow off steam or share those experiences with others? That depends on an individual basis I suppose. I'm not the type of individual that would need that. I didn't need that, I didn't feel the need to say, "Oh my God, Joe you should have seen this the other night. It was horrific, etc." I've never really been that kind of a person anyway. So I think that's just individual. Some people might have felt an extreme desire to do that. I did share things, some of these experiences that I've already alluded to and spoken about. When we did have our monthly meetings down in Da Nang, so I could talk at that point. If I needed something that was really bugging me or causing me trouble I would probably use that opportunity to talk about it more than any other. I don't recall ever having to call a doctor and we had pretty primitive ways of calling, you could imagine. I never called down to I Corps Headquarters in Da

Nang about it. Because they would say, "Deal with it. Do the best you can." Or something to that effect anyway. That never came to my mind about other than the way I've explained it. It might sound cruel, heartless cold, I don't know. Perhaps come across that way, I don't mean it that way. But it's just my personality didn't require that I didn't need that to get by.

**Hansley: I think it shows that you were just doing your job. And you were just going to be tough about it.**

Strohl: Yes. A question similar to that has been asked by others that I've talked to. "Well, did you worry about each day and were you going to be there the next day, etc." I said, "Never, because what's going to happen is what's going to happen." It's similar to that kind of feeling. It was a waste of time to think like that.

**Hansley: I know you left Quang Tri about August of '71, or is that when you got out? When did you leave Quang Tri?**

Strohl: I left a year later, February '71. So Feb. '70 to Feb. '71.

**Hansley: Okay.**

Strohl: And I had another duty station after that. But go ahead.

**Hansley: While you were up at Quang Tri, did you, during that year did you ever have the opportunity to go on leave and get away from it. And if you did, where did you go?**

Strohl: Yes, I did have the opportunity; called it R&R back in those days. There were choices that were available; that were authorized. You may have heard other vets talk about Hawaii because that's usually where the married vets would go to meet their wives. So Hawaii was a choice, Manilla was a choice, Sydney, Australia was a choice and Bangkok was a choice. I chose Sydney, Australia and also Manilla. So I was kind of a two-for because they were close enough so I did... you were given I think seven days' time. They were both reachable. I chose Sydney because when I was back in medical school, again backing up for a while, [and] back at Yale Medical School one of the post-graduate doctors in training there, so he would have been 3-4 years ahead of me. [W]e became quite friendly. He was an Australian, native Australian but he was going to Yale for post graduate medical training. He was from Sydney. His name was Ken Perkins; I haven't seen him since, but a wonderful guy. He and I got along very well. He was at Yale for at least three years of post-doctoral training while I was there for four in medical school. It wasn't a small amount of time we got to

know each other. And he said when he left and I left for graduation, "Well, if you're ever get by Australia, ol' mate give me a call, look me up," and so on. And he gave me his phone number and address. I said, "Okay, Ken." Thinking I'd never see him again (laughing). And of course the Army wasn't in the picture at that point. This was in medical school still. Low and behold as the twists of fate turned I ended up in Vietnam and one of the choices was Sydney. I wrote him a letter, you didn't call from where I was, you didn't do anything, you didn't Twitter, you didn't Facebook you wrote letters. So I wrote him a letter told him where I was what I was doing and I was thinking about R&R and would it be feasible or possible to hook Sydney into my plans and if so could I meet up with him and his family, his wife and children. And he wrote back and he said, "Absolutely, we'd love to have you come see us, visit us while you're here." To shorten the story, I ended up flying on; you flew standby as you probably know on Military Airlift Command, MAC planes, and flew out of Da Nang with intermediate stops in Manilla and then Sydney. Landed there, he was at the airport, picked me up and it was like going back in to... it was very much like California. Sydney reminded me of the climate, the people, the houses, except for the accents of the people. Very friendly, Aussies are very friendly, very warm. He took me to his hospital where he was in practice. He took me to the outback where we went into a little bit, it was just over the mountains, so it didn't take long to get there and where he had grown up as a boy. So I was able to experience something completely different from the average trip of an active duty soldier on leave in Sydney. Had dinner with his family in the back yard and they had a barbie, that's their barbeque word for barbeque. Very happy, pleasant experience, wonderful man and family. So yes, I did do that.

**Hansley:**      **How many days were you there?**

Strohl:            Four.

**Hansley:**      **Where did you stay?**

Strohl:            I stayed at, I believe the services had a, not a USO, a hotel where you could... I don't remember the name of it. That's kind of foggy in my mind. It was open for people on leave to stay there. I don't remember the name of it.

**Hansley:**      **You didn't stay with Dr. Perkins?**

Strohl:            No. That would have been too big an imposition. He was still busy in his practice. He had to come after seeing patients and pick me up and

so on. No, I did not stay there at their house. Went to their house, didn't stay there.

**Hansley: How about Manilla?**

Strohl: We stayed at the major army base just outside, oh Manilla, no. I misspoke, Tokyo. I went to Tokyo. I went with another doctor who was from another unit and we went to the Army base. Yokosuka, no that's a Navy base, there was a major Army base outside of Tokyo which was connected by a train to Tokyo where we could stay at the Army base and eat a nice dinner at the Officers Club and it was really a wonderful... it felt like you were in a stateside military base because it had all the accoutrements and everything. That was for I think three days, so four and three and the trip to Tokyo was interesting but I really probably want to repeat it again. It was, the Japanese are not overly effusive to foreigners, [and] in fact they don't like them very much. We had to be in uniform when we were there. They weren't negative but they just avoided you. Very few of them [spoke] English and it was kind of, not negative experience, but I wouldn't repeat it, I wouldn't go back.

**Hansley: When you had daily down time, which obviously since you were the only doctor [that was] up in Quang Tri, free time was at a minimum. What did you do for that down time?**

Strohl: The USO had a branch up there, believe it or not. They had magazines and they also got the Chicago tribune. They got papers from various places.

**Hansley: How old were the papers?**

Strohl: They were about two weeks old, something like that. By the time they made their way over there. I would try to get over there once or twice a week (coughing) allotted and because it was an air conditioned building which was unusual. It was staffed by a male, it wasn't a female. Nice person and it was nice to read even two-week-old Cubs and White Sox and stuff like that (laughing). What's going on in Chicago at that point and catching up on all the political mayhem that was going on with the conflict, the war. So that was my main place to go, the USO building. There wasn't much else, we didn't have a library on the base, we didn't have... we had an Officer's Club which might have been more like a closet like this. It had a little bar and so on and you could go... but you weren't going to go there in the middle of the day, might go there at night and see who was there. Certainly didn't drink much, I drank some but not much, maybe one gin and tonic or whatever but I do remember that the drinks were 25 cents. I



remember that and there were plenty of officers who took advantage of that (laughing). You'd walk in the building and they'd say, "I'm buying for everybody here." And that would be two dollars (laughing) because it was 25 cents, so they could buy eight drinks for two dollars (more laughing). You couldn't spend any money over there, there was nothing... I saved every penny. I was a bachelor and my checks, I never even saw them they were automatically deposited back in the states. You had script, have you heard about script? They used script; they didn't use any US coins or currency there because the Vietnamese wanted... They printed up this script and I used to have one because they were fascinating to have but I don't it any more. Two dollars, one dollar had a few coins and so on it says US Armed Forces on it or something like that. But that's how you paid for your drinks.

**Hansley: Did you write home a lot? And if you did, did you write different letters to your step mom vs. a letter to your dad. Did you maybe send you dad that letter to his office so your step mom wouldn't see it?**

Strohl: Interesting question, fascinating question. The answer is no. I wrote letters probably weekly. They've all been saved. My sister had them and gave them to me probably ten years ago. It's about a stack that big. I haven't read them, haven't opened them and I don't really intend to. They're there for somebody to read some day but not me. I just don't want to relive that and see how stupid I might have been and what I was saying. Who knows? I don't remember what I wrote except, probably what was going on at the time. I wrote to both my parents, my father would have thought that unseemly to do that. He was a very old fashioned person and this was his new wife and that was his wife. Although he went through, just as an aside here, I don't mean to sound he was hard bitten... this aside is interesting, it has nothing to do with the service but as she died in my child birth he never had a wife, his first wife thereafter, bam, like that, here today gone tomorrow. Going to WWII, come back, get remarried and in his will, he passed away in '73, he requested to be buried in Hyde Park next to my mother which always caused some friction with my step mother. She went along with it, to give her all the credit that is due. She didn't fight it, but you could tell that it was something that rubbed her the wrong way, because no matter how long they were married he was still showing the attachment he had to his first wife. That's the most significant way you could show that I would think, to say where you want to be buried after you pass away. They're buried in separate places, my stepmother with her family and my father with his first wife, my mother. I guess my point is he would have thought that it would be unseemly to do that because of being around the back door and it would cause trouble if it was ever found out.

**Hansley:** **When your time was up in Vietnam in February of '71, how long did it take for you to get out of country and what port did you go out of and where did you land when you got here before you got to your next duty station?**

Strohl: First of all, we flew out of Cam Ranh Bay, number one. It took me a day to get down there because tats about half way between Quang Tri and Tan Son Nhut. Remember I told you it took two days to get up there it took me about a day to get back to Cam Ranh Bay. Again when we had a flight with all doctors on it and it was *World Airways* going back. It was a different commercial lessee; *Flying Tiger* going over and *World Airways* coming back. I don't remember meeting any doctors that we saw on the first flight because they would have scattered all over the country. So I never saw the original ones who were down at the Quonset hut. A new group flew back.

**Hansley:** **What was the atmosphere on that flight?**

Strohl: Quick vignette before we tell you that. As we were out on the tarmac on the next plane to go, to leave Cam Ranh Bay, to get out of Vietnam after a year of all of everybody's experiences. The engines were running and you begin to accelerate. As we were sitting on the tarmac with the engines running and beginning to accelerate, the pilot came on the intercom and he said, "We're going to have to pull back to the base, embarkation area because the entire airfield is under rocket attack." You can imagine what we thought. Here we are about to leave after a year and this is going to entrap us here and who knows how long that will be and who knows if we might get hit or whatever. Obviously we didn't, I wouldn't be here telling this story otherwise but we had to pull back and wait about two or three hours for the rocket attack to stop, pull back out and took off and the rest of the trip was uneventful. Cam Ranh Bay was like a big bowl surrounded by mountains so it was easy to attack it. It was under frequent attack as far as I was told. We landed at Fort Lewis, Washington on our return trip. We were greeted as we got off and were walking through the entrance to the base holding area to get our bags, greeted by a wonderful chanting, wonderful in cynical terms, group about "Go home pigs!" [There was] screaming, yelling, shouting, swearing, etc. I remember leaning over as we were walking and saying to the guy next to me, "Welcome home." [T]hat was all of the worst of the turmoil still going on and still being definitely shown to troops in uniform coming home.

**Hansley:** **So this was not a military airport?**

Strohl: Yes it was, Fort Lewis, Washington.

**Hansley: How did...**

Strohl: How did they get in?

**Hansley: Yeah.**

Strohl: They were in an area behind two fences. This was not a secure area in the sense of having fighter jets come in. It's where they were landing, a lot of them landed from Vietnam, they were taking off and landing there. They were there... many of the other people were there to meet their loved ones, so they just intermingled with those or shoved them out or whatever. It was not... I see what you mean. It wasn't a secure part in the sense of having a pass to get in for these individuals waiting at that particular arrival area, I guess. These weren't military jets coming in, they were military personnel on them but they were the leased jets from *World Air*.

**Hansley: What was your next duty station?**

Strohl: Fort Benjamin Harrison in Indianapolis, Indiana.

**Hansley: What were your duties there?**

Strohl: Basically the same as they were up at Fort Campbell which was to take care of personnel for ordinary... Now I was back in the GP mode. Taking care of the personnel who were stationed there for ordinary coughs, colds, etc. and their dependents. So we were back in that mode again. That was a much smaller base; it was the finance center for the Army. It was a non-combat base. The military has a very nice policy of when you are about ready to be discharged from the service, if you have short time at a base they try to place you as close to your home as possible so that... and it's a cynical reason but I took it as a nice reason. The cynical reason is so they won't have to pay you travel charges from let's say San Diego to Chicago but from Indianapolis to Chicago. I was waxing poetic all this and that, nice and so on. And they give you the opportunity, which I remember, too, because I filled out a form that said, "What bases would you liked to be assigned to when you get out of Vietnam?" At some point that came to me. I put down Fort Sheridan as my first choice which is right in the suburbs; I could have commuted each day. I think I only put Fort Sheridan, maybe they gave you one choice, I put fort Sheridan, didn't get it but I got Fort Benjamin Harrison which is really a fairly close base, 2 1/2 hours away, nice and I had a nice experience there, enjoyed it. Of course it was nice just to be out of the turmoil of prior year and Indianapolis

was a nice city. They were very friendly to vets down there. The people were. They had no animosity and so much more conservative state as you know.

**Hansley:** **[When were] you were discharged?**

Strohl: July '71, July 9, 1971.

**Hansley:** **How long did it take you to actually get home once you were discharged? How did you get home?**

Strohl: I got home by; I think I took the train again. Let's see, where did I come out? Maybe I came out of Seattle. That's right, I came out of Seattle. Came on the, remember the *Northern Pacific* and the *Great Northern*? I came on one of those two lines, I forgot, through Minneapolis and down. It took two days, but it was two days of pleasure for me because I like trains. That's how I got home, by train and it took about two days.

**Hansley:** **Then you got down to Benjamin Harrison? You got discharged from Harrison?**

Strohl: Right.

**Hansley:** **How did you get back home from there? How did you get back to Chicago?**

Strohl: I bought a car at some point along there after I got back. How did I do that? Or when did I do it? Let's see. Must have been one of the first things I did. I had a car. I got back by car, but I didn't come back to Chicago, I went to Ann Arbor to do my... that was the deflection of... well, I mean I came to Chicago to say hello and I had a few days between going to Fort Benjamin Harrison and all that but immediately upon discharge, which was July 9, I headed for Ann Arbor because remember I told you the training starts on July 1 for each of those. Remember the internship was July 1 to July 1 of the residencies, which is what they're called. The one who Doctor Harold told me, "Your position is there two years from now." So I was already eight days late, but I couldn't get out of the Army obviously, that was not going to happen, he knew that, so he was kind about that as well. I got there eight days late on July 9; I think I drove up the same day as the discharge and reported for duty up there. That's how I did that. I had a vehicle that I purchased; getting back into civilian life slowly that way.

**Hansley:** **It wasn't that difficult, you didn't have too many transition problems? You had come back to the states; you were at Fort**

**[Benjamin] Harrison for several months? From combat to civilian life, it was... combat, to military life in the states and then civilian life?**

Strohl: For me. That's right, that's right; exactly. Now I did meet a friend who met me at the airport at Fort Lewis who was a classmate of mine in medical school at Yale. He was in the Navy at Whidbey Island. I did spend one day with him. He took me to his house, he was still on active duty also, but he had never left the country. He'd been at Whidbey Island for his two years. As he was driving back to the airport the next day, he said, "What's the matter?" He knew me pretty well. I said, "What do you mean, 'what's the matter?'" He said, "Well you haven't been talking." And I said, "Well I didn't even realize that." So I must have been in that mode you were talking about. About the change because we left Cam Ranh Bay after the rocket attack and landed back in a snow storm at Fort Lewis. Being yelled and shot at and whatever, not shot at, shouted at. So that was all a jumble, so anyway I did show some of that behavior without knowing it with my friend, Creed Wood who's an orthopedic surgeon. Only he probably would have noticed it. I don't know he just knew I wasn't myself. But then I got to Ann Arbor and we had all five of us, there were five in our class of residence were veterans as I mentioned. One of whom had been in Vietnam, as a doctor. Not in my area, not the same experience but he did in fact have horrible nightmares according to what his wife would tell us. He wouldn't sleep well. I don't know exactly what his position was over there, he never wanted to talk about it but he had nightmares and he ultimately died ten years later of melanoma which ironically is skin cancer. So he passed away very early in life. He was very much scarred by his experience. How and why, I don't know he never shared it. The other three of us, I think acted pretty normally. One was on a Navy ship and he basically played cards all day long even though he was off shore Vietnam. He might as well been in South Carolina and the other one never left the states.

**Hansley: Have you kept in touch with any of your military friends?**

Strohl: No, [I] didn't have a whole lot of military friends because of where I was and what I was doing. The short answer is no. the one doctor that was nearby I saw once in Atlanta, Georgia at a meeting a few years later but that was more or less by convenience because we were both going to be there than it was a deep friendship. I really didn't have any deep abiding friendships. Both circumstantial and otherwise that evolved out of the war.

**Hansley: Have any of your patients from Quang Tri tried to look you up since then? The doctor who managed to get them back to the field hospital that could get them fixed up and maybe shipped home.**

Strohl: Not per se. not that I know of, let's put it that way, however, it's an interesting question again because if I may be able to tell you this part of my experience. Once I left the service, even though we're having this conversation today, I basically, completely and totally buried that for the better part of, let me give you some exact figures here, from '74 when I got out until 2007 or 2008, so that would be '74-2004 would be 35, 36 years, buried it... totally buried it. The only thing I did to acknowledge my service, you being in Chicago may or may not remember that Chicago had the first and only remembrance of Vietnam veterans with that parade that Wally Phillips did in '86-'85, somewhere around there. Nobody had a parade for anybody in the country, nobody, [and] nowhere. So Wally, who I think was a great guy and used to listen to him all the time, came up with this idea and it really took off as you know. Even then, I wasn't sure, my wife said, "You should go and join in." It was at Navy Pier. I said, "No, I..." Because I had office hours that day, lots of patients to see, just a normal typical day. I was in that mode of thought up until the night before, literally. So from 1974 up until the night before this parade, when I changed my mind, I had buried Vietnam and the experiences; rarely if ever talked about it with anyone, including my wife. She's known most of these experiences, but they just came out a little bit at a time. My daughters heard, too. I said, "You know, I think you're right. I've changed my mind." And what changed my mind was listening to Wally Phillips talking to veterans from around the country that were calling his show in the morning and they said, "You know Wally, I'm coming from Texas." I don't know if you heard this specifically when you were in Chicago. Were you here in the '80s? Okay. They would call in and I would listen to him while I was going to work in the morning and he was really on this for like three, four, five [or] six months because it took a lot of planning. He kept saying, "You know we want all the veterans we can. We love veterans here in Chicago." [This] turned out to be incredibly true. He said, "You'll be welcomed and so on." And he really talked it up and people were calling from Boston, Philadelphia and Texas and Seattle and San Francisco, "I'm coming Wally, if I have to walk I'm coming." They'd never had the opportunity to have someone say thank you for your service. It hadn't happened before. I changed my mind based on listening to all those guys because they got to me, not Wally, not the concept but they got to em. They said, "I'll be there, I was a member of such and such in this division and I was in the Air Force and Marine Corps and I served in XYZ." And that got my juices stirred. So I pulled out my old uniform, my combat uniform from Vietnam. Not my stateside uniform, my

camouflage. And I put it on and we lived up near north at that point; walking distance from Navy Pier. I lived in an apartment. I went down the elevator and I walked out on to Lake Shore Drive and it was a beautiful June day and it was about eight in the morning and the sun was just coming up over Lake Michigan and my wife and daughter opened the wind down and looked out and waved and said, "Good luck." And I walked down there to Navy Pier and you didn't know where your unit was going to be but they kept saying when you get there just look for the flags of your unit and you'll know. And you know it's a mile walk. And they were stating at the beginning because there were so many. I think there were a hundred thousand or more that participated maybe more. I kept looking for the Red Diamond because that was my organization and I look and I went past the First Marine Division and they were all mixed together and I went past the Navy from the various ships and I went past the Big Red One, the First Army Division, [and] all the well-known ones. Didn't see mine, 101st, 82nd Airborne, all of them and... it was like a big fraternity, they said, "Welcome home, brother" to everybody; pretty emotional.

**Hansley: Did you ever find the Red Diamond?**

Strohl: Yes. Way at the end. Way at the end. All the way at the back by the auditorium, you know where that beautiful pavilion is? Where the gorgeous lights are, they were outside on the deck. There they were. And that was really emotional. I didn't know any of them because again, most of them were Infantry. That's why my experience was so unique. I wasn't part of a hospital. I was part of an Infantry Division. That made it special. Welcome home. Then we began the marching as you may or may not recall. Of course, it was at the beginning. They went down Grand Avenue to start and then worked their way over to LaSalle and wherever we were going there were people lining the streets on both sides, signs up in the air and clapping and welcome home and I can remember like yesterday... we were marching in formation all mixed together but our unit was together, but marching in lines with no particular, it wasn't a friend next to you or anything like that, you got in there and you started marching. I could hear this talking going on in front and behind me, they said, "This city is fabulous." These were guys from out of town, from other places. They said, "I've never been to Chicago." I could hear this; I was getting more choked up by the second... They said, "This is the first time that we have ever been acknowledged." The further we got into the parade and the confetti and everything and the guys in the wheelchairs leading the parade, the more emotional these guys got, they said, "This is an experience I've never expected and I've never experienced before and hooray for Chicago." So that made me double emotional because they were talking about our city and how much they loved it.

Then we got down to the end there where the Board of Trade was and there was General Westmoreland on the reviewing stand. He was the head chief leader of the parade, not leader but the grand marshal. As everybody went by, they snapped a salute on him and he was saluting everybody. It was really an incredible experience. That got me that was the only time I didn't anything and then I buried it again. That was a phenomenal experience and I'm glad that I did it. Remember the traveling wall? They had the Vietnam wall out there by the Conrad Hilton and everybody went over to that and looked at it. Some people were taking the paper and taking the names down and so on. I buried it until about 2007 which [was] when I retired from full medical practice and I had free time to myself. I was busy doing other things, but none of it was service oriented. I never had any thoughts, now I'm going to do that. But it began to become obvious to me as I had this free time to think that I had buried a very important part of my life and I had actually done a good job of completely eliminating it from my thinking processes. And I decided I didn't like that, I didn't want to do that, I wanted to acknowledge it and make it a part of my life because it was a seminal event regardless on if it was positive or negative. The first thing I did was to go to a local community out in Michigan that has a VFW post and I talked to the commander there and I told him I was thinking of possibly joining. He said, "Well, we'd love to have you." I picked the VFW on purpose because that is limited to individuals, male and female who have served in a combat situation in a foreign country. The American Legion, which is a wonderful organization, you can serve in a National Guard unit in the suburbs of Chicago and never leave the town or the city and be a member and be a veteran and that's fine, I'm not making fun of it at all, I don't mean it in a derogatory way. I wanted to acknowledge that I was with a group of people, while the others had the same things I did. They had served; it wasn't Iraq and Afghanistan at that point. There eligible for those things. It was like a big fraternity and brotherhood again, much like the parade. Maybe that did bubble up the years later and caused me to do it. But, whatever did it did it. That went on, I've now been a member this is now my 4th or 5th year in the VFW. Last year, last summer, I was sitting in my house one day out in Michigan and the phone rang and I picked it up and answered. The voice, it was a male voice on the other end, it said, "Is this Lee Strohl?" and I said, "Yes." Normally, I don't answer that way because I don't know if it's somebody selling life insurance or whatever, but I thought this time I'll say it. And I said, "Yes, who's calling?" And he said, "This is Bernie King calling from Atlanta, Georgia." He said, "Are you the same Lee Strohl that was stationed at the Camp Red Devil Combat Base in Quang Tri, Vietnam in 1970-1971 and were the Battalion Surgeon?" I said, "You found me." They had right down... I said, "Yep, you found me. How did you find me?" He said, "This is Bernie King, I'm the



president of the organization, the 5th Infantry Division of the US Army." And I said, "Well, how did you find me?" And he said, "Well, the Pentagon releases after 25 years, records of service location." And he said, "They've released records now that they were released. Which give us names that we haven't been able to find before of we don't have any knowledge of who these people are." And he said, "We found you because you were a part of our organization." And he said, "I noticed you are not a member." And I said, "Well, that's because I didn't know this organization existed." Which is true, I didn't I had no idea there was such an organization. And he said, "Well, we'd love to have you join." I said, "I'd be happy to join and would love to, please send me an application." Which they did, obviously. The rest is history. He said, "We have an annual meeting of the 5th Division from Quang Tri and surrounding areas, nationwide and it's in Atlanta this year, and that's why I'm the president, because the president gets to pick where we're going to have it." This year, for example, it's in St. Louis. Next year in Nashville, in 2014 so it moves around the country. Again, I didn't know about this until a year ago and the phone call happened I didn't know it. I might have joined earlier had I known there was such an organization because it really drills down to where I was, who the people were that I served with. Everybody there had the same common experience and knew what we were talking about. You didn't have to explain it to someone. They knew where Quang Tri was because they were there. They knew the rocket attacks, they were there. I went down to the meeting in September of 2012, last year and I walked in there and clearly people didn't know who I was but they knew I was a member. They said, "Are you a new member? Welcome. Welcome, brother. Welcome, welcome, welcome, welcome." And I would explain, I do have a connection to your question which was coming up. Did anybody every come up to me? I was made to feel immediately welcome. And they said, "Well, where were you up in Quang Tri?" I said, "I was up on the base Headquarters camp." And they said, "Well, what were you?" and I said, "Well, I was a doctor up there." And they said, "Oh!" there was confusion at the beginning because as you are probably aware, the Infantry and Artillery and Combat Officers called the Corpsmen "doc" so when I said, doctor, I said "doctor" I didn't say "doc", I said I was a doctor, that's all I said I didn't say I was a Captain or anything else, I didn't want to be officious about it. So they said, "Oh, where were you, doc? Were you out here in this fire base, or that fire base?" I said, "No, I was a doctor and I was on the Headquarters base at Command Headquarters." And then they said, "Oh." Either a light bulb went on or other train of thinking was off because they were thinking of a Corpsman out there that put a bandage on when they got shot and brought back. They didn't get that at the beginning. They didn't get it. They were confused. They said, "Where exactly were you?" And I told them again.

And they said, "Wow." And then it really picked up in the interest. They've had these for 40 years ever since they got out and I didn't know it until last year, I promise you. So for 39 years these guys have been going back. By the way, I'm not going to go every year because it would be repetitive. They've been going year after year after year. They said to me, "This is the first time in all the reunions we have had, that we have had a doctor come." First time. I was doubly welcome. I was not only welcomed because I had served there; I was welcome because nobody had ever talked to a doctor. Then they would start joking. They'd come up and they'd raise their shirt and said, "Did you put these stitches in me." (Laughing) I didn't know; I had no idea. "How about this?" and they'd pull up their shorts or whatever so it became a joke. That answers your question. It could have been who knows? I don't know. That's a long story for a short question. I don't know of anyone specifically. They said, "Well, that's where I was and you must have been, what year were you there?" some we can eliminate because I wasn't there at the time they had their injury.

**Hansley:** **It might have been you, or someone who is immediately after you.**

Strohl: Absolutely right. My goodness, I don't remember. They don't come in with their name tags on, they've been blown off.

**Hansley:** **How did you decide, once you, obviously you had said you were going to go into dermatology before you got drafted? How did you decide dermatology and after basically being a surgeon and things like that out in Vietnam, you stayed with dermatology?**

Strohl: That's another interesting question. I had a surgeon for a father so I knew what a surgeon did, as far as the back story. We all know what surgeons do and I watched his life. I knew I didn't want his life because he didn't have a life. He loved it, don't misunderstand, he loved it. But he never had a life. He was gone at two in the morning, Christmas day, Easter Sunday, this, that and the other because that's what a surgeon does. I didn't want that and groups had not yet developed at that point yet either where you could get enough coverage where you could get a few days off to have a life where your partners would cover you. That hadn't really happened even in the '70s very much most surgeons were still on their own and still working 80 hours a week and were never home and couldn't do this that and the other. I knew I didn't want that. So then I began to think what specialties would allow me to, in my quotes, have a life. Meaning have other interests and other outlets for free time, if you want to call I that, which still is minimal with any doctor but still it would be less minimal than with surgeons orthopedic doctors obstetricians, etc. so I

boiled it down to several possibilities, one being a pathologist, because they do scheduled things, they do autopsy, but it's on a schedule. I ruled that out quickly because it didn't interest me whatsoever. I was talking about the possibilities of free time, now. A radiologist, looking at x-rays, I found that boring because you are looking at x-rays and not people for the rest of your life; didn't want that. I thought about ophthalmology, which is an interesting field and can control your time, you're taking out cataracts, [and] you're doing, yes... yes and no. Mostly you can. It only dealt with one organ, very limited. I thought about... so I didn't, I ruled it out based on that. Otherwise it's a real appealing specialty. Then I thought, what about dermatology? To answer one of your questions, you get to do quite a bit of surgery, which I did; quite a bit. I took off thousands of skin cancers over the years. You get to see both sexes, so for an obstetrician you're only seeing one sex; a urologist, one sex. So that eliminates half of your population right there. I didn't want to do that. You have as much surgery as you wish to do outside of hospital. You can get an office set up, which I did, for surgery. You see both sexes, you deal with all ages. [P]ediatricians, that was another thought, no. At 11-years-old, you no longer see your patients, you're always churning out new ones; I didn't want that. So you see all ages, I would see newborns all the way up to 100 year olds. Dermatologists do. You use both sexes; you can do your surgery. You have plenty of medical issues as well, psoriasis, etc. So you have surgery and medicine combined into a specialty that also has both sexes and you can control your hours.

**Hansley:** **Rarely is there an emergency that you can go to at two in the morning?**

**Strohl:** That's correct, very rare. Also, dermatologists were then and still are in great demand. There were not very many. When I finished my training, there were 4,000 dermatologists in the United States. Now, it's up to about nine or ten thousand which sounds like a large number, but it isn't. For all those reasons, that's why I chose it.

**Hansley:** **When did you join the teaching staff at Presbyterian St. Luke's Hospital?**

**Strohl:** Immediately upon starting practice after I completed my residency at University of Michigan in 1974 and I moved back to Chicago. We looked at a lot of different places, my wife and I. ended up deciding coming back to Chicago. She's not a Chicagoan, but she wasn't unhappy with that choice. I finished on July 1, '74 in Ann Arbor; I'd been doing the back planning and all of that for the last few months here. I found a gentleman doctor, a dermatologist who was retiring

who was willing to sell me his equipment and turned it over to me and the old store for men, the Marshall Field Building where I had an office for ten years before moving to the Pittsfield Building. I started; I think August 1st or something like that. In the meantime, between July 1 and August 1 I got a phone call from the chairman of the department of dermatology at Pres. St. Luke's, where by the way my father had been on the staff for 30 years before he died. He was a surgeon there. So at least the name was known, I was in a different field. But anyway, he called me up and said, "I'd like to have lunch with you." So I joined him. And he said, "We're starting, we're in the process of starting..." This was 1974, "We're in the process of starting a brand new department of dermatology here at Pres. St. Luke's. We had not had one before. Dermatology used to be a part of the internal medicine department, but Pres. St. Luke's decided that it was so important that their starting a brand new department and I'm the chairman." He came from the University of Chicago. He said, "We have two other members of our faculty right now and I would like to offer you a position on the faculty if you would be interested." I said I would be very interested and the rest is history. I joined Pres. St. Luke's in August of that year and I was there until 1999 for 25 years until I closed down my Chicago offices and kept my ones in Michigan and Indiana, which is a different story, but I was there for 25 years, started right away and taught residents and interns. That's part of the responsibility of being on the staff there.

**Hansley: When and where did you meet your wife? And do you have any children?**

Strohl: Yes, one daughter who's 31 is now in law school at Kent College of Law down the street on Adams; first year. I met my wife in Ann Arbor after getting out of the service in 1971. I got out of the service and met her shortly thereafter and we were married 1973. She was a graduate student. She had been an undergraduate there and she was in graduate school when I met here and has her masters in English from the University of Michigan. We met and I think all the sparks and we got married of May of 1973. She's a native of Grand Rapids, Michigan. Her parents are still living. Her father, my father in law is a WWII veteran who is 92 years old. So he and I share a lot of interesting talk about the varying experiences we had. He was in Burma during WWII in the 2nd Corps. I told him about this interview today and he said, "Oh that sounds really interesting. Let me know about it." He was intrigued about hearing. He said he'd given interviews up in Grand Rapids about his experience over the years as well.

**Hansley: During your time in the service, especially when you were overseas, did you miss any major birthdays or deaths in the**

**family, maybe cousins having babies or their wedding s or anything like that?**

Strohl: Actually, no. birthdays, absent... my own, which I didn't ever think about. And that isn't really important. I'm sure you were alluding to other major ones like 80th or 90th for somebody. No, fortunately that didn't happen and no one died in the families and no cousins or whatever got married. No it was a pretty quiet time I guess you could say from that stand point.

**Hansley: Have you ever been back to Vietnam? And would you want to if you haven't?**

Strohl: Have not gone back and do not wish to. My wife's asked me probably a dozen times if I want to go because she has a lot of friends that go. I say, " I don't really wish to go back because I don't want to see a golf course where people were dying before and all that kind of thing." No. No. maybe that's a cynical attitude, I do not want to do it. Have no desire whatsoever. She'd go tomorrow if I would agree.

**Hansley: A little bit of a fun question that we've been asking all the veterans. How did your boots feel when you were issued them? Were they comfortable, if they weren't how did you make them comfortable?**

Strohl: Mine were reasonably comfortable I didn't have to bend them or stretch them. We had two different kinds of boots. One would be the jungle boots, those were actually pretty comfortable they had little holes in the side that let the air in and out and let the water in and out if you got them wet. One [was] the stateside dress boots. Those were a little stiffer and sometimes could be tight. I never experienced any major trouble with my boots. I suspect maybe it's because I didn't walk in them as much as probably some of the other vets you've talked to had to walk in them and march in them and do all kinds of things like that. That would be a different story. I was pretty much just walking in various places.

**Hansley: Is there anything else you would like to add that you thought maybe I would have brought up and I didn't or something else that you'd like to say?**

Strohl: Did I mention about the shrapnel? That would be one thing; otherwise I think we've covered as thoroughly as I can think. I'm not aware of anything. I have kept this piece of genuine North Vietnamese shrapnel, not Vietcong, North Vietnamese shrapnel on my desk since the day I arrived back from Vietnam because it reminds of how I call it

"quick sonic and evanescent" life can be. Here today, gone tomorrow. But for the sandbags that were outside our hooch and protected us, they were six or seven feet high, this might well have killed me or anyone else in the area but fortunately it didn't because this is what was going around on the base every night when we would get rocketed. You could hear them whistling around. That's a very treasured piece. Its irreplaceable, I keep it very closely guarded.

**Hansley:** **Is there any one of your experiences over the course either at Fort Campbell, [Fort] Benjamin Harrison or Vietnam that you feel exemplifies your time in the service?**

**Strohl:** Because my assignment was to be a doctor, I think you are a doctor anywhere you go. I think what would exemplify it is providing the care throughout various different situations, some combat some non-combat, etc. I'm not sure that's an ample answer, it's a tough question. I guess what would exemplify it is that the care should not change for the doctor who is providing it. The circumstances change, the circumstances are different but the care that is given should be on equilibrium in my opinion. That's a way to answer it. It shouldn't be different t over here and not over here, it should be the same. That'd be the only way I know how to provide it.

**Hansley:** **What do you feel young people, the younger generation can get from your experiences? What can they learn?**

**Strohl:** I think a basic point would be try not to be diverted when you're in difficult situations beyond your control to allow yourself to be diverted from your appointed chore or goal or assignment. Because if you do that then you will stray far off what should be done and what must be done. I would suspect the best way to answer it is to try to be yourself, try to have your own set of ideals and ethical behavior and not let those get deviated by what is going on around you. Keep it the same, on an even keel throughout challenges no matter what they may be for anyone who is younger. There are challenges; given in life is that there are challenges. There will always be challenges, there will always be problems, [and] it's how you deal with them not whether you can get rid of them. That would be a philosophical answer.

**Hansley:** **What would your definition of a citizen soldier be?**

**Strohl:** An individual who is by definition, not a career soldier. You can differentiate it by those who have devoted their career to it. On the other side, so a civilian soldier would be someone who wears two hats, both a civilian life as well as a military life. Sometimes those are done simultaneously such as the National Guard and Reserves.

Sometimes they are put aside the civilian part of your life. That hat is taken off; you put on the military hat for when you are on your tour of duty or your service requirements. But they can blend together in the same individual as long as you keep your focus on whichever it is that you are doing at that time which gets back to what we said before. Try to keep your focus regardless of what's happening to you. I think civilian soldiers are vital people to our society. They provide a wonderful backdrop to the career soldiers and a much needed filling of a void that otherwise would be enormous.

**Hansley: Dr. Strohl, the Pritzker military library would like to thank you for coming and telling your story. And I would like to thank you for your service and I definitely say welcome home.**

**Strohl: Thank you very much, it's my pleasure.**