Dan Hudson

Salt Lake City, Utah

Interviewer

Tell us a little bit about yourself.

Dan Hudson

Well, I graduated from high school in Miami, Florida in 1961. And no counselors had gotten to me to encourage me to go to college, so I finished high school and a couple weeks later I thought now what I'm gonna do. So I thought I'd just take a bus down to the federal building and talk to an Army recruiter. And I talked to him and asked if I could join the Army, and he was very accommodating. And that very night I was at Fort Benning, Georgia in the Army without knowing very much about it at all. And I had enlisted for the Chemical Corps, and had a little minor injury, actually, an infected blister on my foot in basic training, which put me in the hospital for about seven weeks. I got out of the hospital, went to a little tiny chemical unit, just five people total, and was there doing some training with that unit. And that little detachment of five people was about to go to Germany, and somebody looked at my records and realized I hadn't been through basic training. So then I was sent off from Fort Benning, Georgia to Fort Gordon, Georgia to go through basic training again. Then I finally went to my chemical school training. And I had recognized right away that there was a caste system in place in the military and I was at the wrong end of it. So as soon as I could, I put in an application to go to officer candidate school, and I went to officer candidate school at Fort Sill, Oklahoma and got commissioned in 1963. Actually, it was a very somber affair because President Kennedy was assassinated on November 22nd, 1963, and I was commissioned on the following Tuesday, the 26th of November. And all the frivolity of the ceremony was eliminated and we were just lined up on the stage, given our oath of office and sent off on our way to go home on leave and report to our next assignment. Near the end of my officer candidate school experience, some Special Forces recruiters came and asked for volunteers for Special Forces. And I had never heard of Special Forces, but I knew I would be on jump status, and at that time parachute pay was a significant increase in pay, almost 50 percent over the 200-some dollars I'd get as a second lieutenant each month. So I volunteered for Special Forces, went through that training, and exactly one year after I was commissioned I went to Vietnam in November of 1964 and spent exactly one year there, returning to Fort Bragg, North Carolina in 1965.

Interviewer

When you first joined did you know anything about Vietnam?

Dan Hudson

I'd never heard of Vietnam. And while I was in officer candidate school, we were in training from the instant we woke up in the morning to when we went to bed and tried to polish our boots underneath the covers with the lights

out. So I didn't know anything until I signed in at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. About seven of my 27 officer candidate school classmates to Fort Bragg, six of us in Special Forces and one in an artillery unit. I was an artillery officer. But when I signed in, I wrote down my unit, 5th Special Forces Group, and the staff duty NCO said, "You're going to Vietnam." So I was in the 5th Special Forces Group, and at that time the 5th Special Forces Group at Fort Bragg, North Carolina was sending teams to Vietnam for temporary duty of six-month tours each. And within a few days, I attended my first memorial service there. They had a small obelisk in the group area, and every time one of the group members was killed we had a memorial service. And it wasn't too long before the obelisk was out of space. So I spent a year there in mission training for Vietnam.

Interviewer

What is the role of Special Forces?

Dan Hudson

Well, there are a number of roles. The role for which they were originally conceived and organized, following on experiences in World War II where the OSS, or the Office of Strategic Services sent small teams in to occupy countries, like France and Italy and Yugoslavia and also areas in the Pacific. They would meet with resistance groups and then train them and organize them, and arrange for supplies to be delivered. And also very importantly, to coordinate the activities of these disparate guerrilla groups so that they could serve the larger objective of U.S. forces or U.S. policy. So the basic concept was to train and organize guerrilla forces and equip them, and to lead them in support of U.S. operations. So a small team of maybe a dozen U.S. soldiers could train a guerrilla force of five to fifteen hundred soldiers. So it was very economical in terms of providing forces with a small commitment of U.S. forces. Now, in Vietnam the main mission Special Forces were engaged in was counterinsurgency, which was countering the guerrilla forces that were in the country, the Viet Cong and the significant forces from the North Vietnamese Army, which were infiltrating into South Vietnam. So we were in the position of fighting the guerrilla forces that it would be much easier to train and lead. And rarely Special Forces would engage in direct operations, like the Son Tay raid, which was an attempt to try to rescue prisoners of war from the North Vietnamese prison camp. But mainly, our objective was to train indigenous forces and lead them in pursuit of our objectives.

Interviewer

Did you know that the war was going to expand as much as it did?

Dan Hudson

Well, when I got there in November of '64 both the tactical and strategic situation was pretty grim. And North Vietnamese forces were infiltrating at a rapid rate. There were a series of Special Forces camps along the South Vietnamese and Laotian border and South Vietnamese and Cambodian border and up in the north. And all these camps were trying to train indigenous ethnic minorities, or down in the southern part of Vietnam ethnic religious minorities who, before we started working with them, really had no relationship with the Vietnamese government, and the South Vietnamese government had little, if any, control over the remote areas where these people lived.

So in my case, I was in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, and we were working with Montagnards, Montagnards being a French term for mountain people. And there were a very large number of these indigenous tribes, some very small, some larger, and some very primitive, almost stone age, and some more advance with the written alphabet. Bear in mind that the Vietnamese didn't have a written alphabet until the French missionaries provided them one during their colonial period. So we had various tribes of these Montagnards in each of the Special Forces camps. And then we were technically advising the Vietnam Special Forces. But the Vietnam Special Forces weren't really imbued with any special training. They were mainly political representatives of the Vietnamese government who were there to see what the Special Forces were doing. So we provided advice and training to the Vietnamese Special Forces. We physically engage in the training of the Montagnard forces. And then to complicate things, we had some Chinese Nungs. The Nungs were tribesmen who originally before the French defeat in 1954 had lived up in the northern part of North Vietnam and were vigilantly anticommunist and they moved to the South Vietnam. And American Special Forces recruited these Chinese because they were more adept as military trainees, and also they were fiercely loyal to the Americans. So we would have a small number of these Chinese Nungs, maybe 20 or 30 in each camp, and we'd go on patrol. We usually had about two Americans or two Chinese Nungs for each of the Americans. So I was always two languages removed from the people we were training, so I would have to say something in English, a Vietnamese interpreter would repeat what he thought I said in Vietnamese, and then one of the Montagnard interpreters would repeat what he thought the Vietnamese translator had said. And that was pretty difficult just in a training situation. Imagine doing that just at work, going through two translators just to tell somebody something. When you're under fire, the separation of two languages makes it kinda difficult to have the coordinated action that you'd really like to have.

Interviewer

Did they take commercial airlines to Vietnam?

Dan Hudson

No. Our deployment was supposedly secret. It hardly was because family members and friends around Fort Bragg. But we loaded up on buses, and in the middle of the night we bused to Seymour Johnson Air Force Base. We were isolated there for a couple days, and we flew from this Air Force base in North Carolina non-stop to Hawaii, then to Clarke Air Force Base in the Philippines and then onward to Vietnam.

Interviewer

Did you land at Da Nang?

Dan Hudson

No. We landed I believe either at Bien Hoa or Tan Son Nhut in Saigon. And there was a Special Forces liaison team in Saigon, and there were also some teams who were operating special operations that were not commonly discussed with us. But we just had a couple days of orientation and briefings there, kind of orientation on the geography of South Vietnam and the military division of Vietnam in four corps tactical zones and where we'd be

headed. Then we went up to Na Trang, which was the headquarters of the Special Forces camp, a mid-sized Vietnamese city right on the coast, right on the beach, actually. And we had a couple of days of briefings and orientation there. Then in my case, my detachment flew to Pleiku, which is where our regional Special Forces headquarters would be and spent maybe a night there. And then we were helicoptered to the camp, the first camp I was at by the name of Plei Mrong. It was northwest of Pleiku, kind of at the end of a road in the direction of the Laotian border. And we debarked from our helicopters, we met the existing Special Forces team that'd been there. They were deployed from Okinawa. And we had a couple of hours to chat with them, and they got on the same helicopter as we came in on and off they went.

Interviewer

So it was like a jungle camp.

Dan Hudson

It was in the middle of a jungle. It was at the end of a very rudimentary road that had great big rocks in it, which would gouge big holes in tires every time you drove on it. But it was kind of at the end of a road, and it was surrounded by mountains, which immediately gave me a sense that this wasn't a good place to have a camp. But these camps had been cited years before when the tactical situation was not so dyer and there wasn't a threat of people firing mortars at you frequently. But as it turned out, the location of many of the camps, if not most of the camps, was not, you know, well suited for defense or suited for just going in and out without being observed from afar.

Interviewer

How Special Forces guys were assigned in that group?

Dan Hudson

Well, there were 12 of us. The standard Special Forces camp had two officers. The detachment commander was a captain, and the executive officer was a lieutenant. I was the executive officer. I was the second lieutenant at the time. And then we had ten non-commissioned officers in five different specialties. And the senior ones were the operations and intelligence non-commissioned officers. And then we had two radio specialists, two medics, two weapons specialists and two engineers who were specializing in either construction or destruction in terms of demolitions. So with those five specialties among the enlisted troops, they had the capability to train our troops in the specialties that were required. And the officers were there for leadership and administration. So as the executive officer, I had the responsibility for most of the administration. We were given cash operational funds to pay the troops and to buy all the supplies that we needed and so forth. And then when operations were held, it was typical to have an officer on every operation. So on that very first day that I arrived, a two or three-day patrol had been planned, and the detachment commander felt that he needed to learn about the camp and get settled. So I went out on the very first patrol on the same day that I arrived. So it didn't take me long.

Interviewer

How many of the guerrilla groups were there?

Dan Hudson

It varied tremendously. The number of Americans on a patrol would be a minimum of two and a maximum of four. The longest that I experienced was about ten days. If we went on a longer patrol, then we would always have to have a radio operator because once we walked out of the range of our portable radios, why, our radio communication was by Morse Code using some World War II radios that had to be set up and they were powered by hand-cranked generator. Then we'd always have a medic, and the Special Forces medics were extremely well-trained compared to normal Army medics. So that was very important for us. And then there was an officer, and then there coulda been any one of the other NCOs from the demolitions or weapons or the operations and intelligence specialty.

Interviewer

Did you go out the first day?

Dan Hudson

We went out the very day, and we went to a couple of Montagnard villages. And we arrived at one village in the early evening. We ate there. And while I was sitting in a village and I'd taken off my pistol belt and rucksack and put them down and had walked over while we're eating, and there was some shooting at the edge of the village. And I looked around for my pistol belt and my weapon and everything. That was the first time that I ever walked away even one foot from my weapon. But the Vietnamese Special Forces came back and I asked what was happening. They said, "Oh, just a Viet Cong patrol was walking in the village and we exchanged some fire and we shot one." So I asked to go see him, and they said, "Oh, no. We'll show him to you in the morning. We're gonna set up an ambush hoping that somebody will come back and try to drag him off." So we slept in the village that night, and the next morning we proceeded out of the village along this little footpath.

Interviewer

Did you have a tent that you slept in?

Dan Hudson

No. We just slept on the ground. We had ponchos, kind of a canvas poncho and there was a cloth poncho liner that you could tie into that thing to make a rudimentary sleeping bag. But during the dry season, we just slept on the ground. And in the wet season, we'd try to sleep in the poncho, which would keep you dry for a few minutes. But we didn't have any creature comforts that wouldn't fit in our pockets, or maybe in a rucksack. So at the very beginning, some people tried to carry an air mattress. Especially in the dry season we started off with a tremendous load of water because there was no water to be had. The streams were dry and you would have to walk a tremendous distance or go to some water source. So we carried as much water as we could. For the Americans, in addition to what the Montagnard soldiers were carrying, why, we had a radio and a survival kit and our own different weapon and ammunition. So the Montagnards who were training were all provided with World

War II type weapons. The American Special Forces had the M-16, which was brand new at the time in 1964. So I was pretty heavily loaded with stuff. I was young and strong then and probably 40 pounds lighter, so I could handle that. It was just kind of roughing it. And, of course, the Montagnards slept on the ground or slept on a flat wooden pallet. So the Vietnamese, the Chinese Nungs and the Montagnards didn't have these comforts of a mattress when we were in the camp. So they were completely comfortable sleeping wherever they happened to be at the time. So we had to be adaptable enough to be uncomfortable sleeping right along with them.

Interviewer

How long did this first patrol last?

Dan Hudson

That first one I believe was two days. We stayed out that one night. And when we left the village in the morning, we came across the Montagnard who'd been shot. Even though I had only been there on day, I could see that he was ethnically considerably different from the Montagnards in the village, so he'd come from some other place. And he'd been shot in the back of the head, and the front of his forehead was missing. He was still alive after being shot maybe ten hours earlier and moaning and groaning, and he was wearing a loin cloth. And his open wound on his head was full of flies. And that was the first casualty of the war that I saw, the day after I arrived at our camp.

Interviewer

How did that make you feel?

Dan Hudson

The first surprise, of course, was he was shot in the head and he was still alive half a day later. Obviously, it was a lethal wound. There was nothing we could do for him. His squad or whatever unit he was with had placed a dressing on his head, and this was a standard U.S. Army field dressing. So they had captured that from some Vietnamese forces. I was, you know, debating in my head, well, what's the proper thing to do here, to shoot him and put him out of his misery because he's obviously going to die? But I was following the guidance of the Vietnamese lieutenant, the Vietnamese Special Forces lieutenant I was supposed to be advising, and said, "No, we leave him here." And we marched off.

Interviewer

What were your accommodations like at the base?

Dan Hudson

Well, we had some buildings that varied. They were generally a very simple wood frame with corrugated sheet metal siding, and either corrugated metal roof or a thatched straw roof. And during the daytime, they were just unbearably hot, and at all times, especially in the dry season. Up in the mountains the dry season was about eight months and the wet season was about four months. And so there were only two seasons, hot and dry or hot and wet. And when it was hot and wet, why, it was muddy everywhere, and when it was hot and dry it was much worse because it was very fine powdery dust everywhere. So the dust would blow and you'd always be dirty and inhaling

the dust and sleeping in the dust. So we would separate the Americans into two to four in different buildings so that if something like a mortar would hit, we wouldn't all get it at once. But we had a standard U.S. Army military cot with a two-inch thick mattress. And, of course, our bunks were carted with mosquito netting. And in the morning, you could look up at the little valley of the mosquito netting and see that you'd be visited by the rodents in your accommodations.

Interviewer

How often did you have to go out on these patrols?

Dan Hudson

That was variable. On the short patrols maybe three a month. And we would have a longer patrol of up to ten days maybe once every other month. So it depended quite a bit on the mission of the patrol. And then in addition to that, every night we put out security ambushes in the vicinity of the parameter. The Americans didn't participate in those. We just trained the Vietnamese. And then every night one of us was on duty all night to monitor the radio, and especially to communicate with our patrol if we had somebody on patrol. The only serious defensive position in the camp was the communications bunker where we had the radio set up that the radio operator would communicate with our higher headquarters and with one of our patrols if they were out on patrol.

Interviewer

How far were you from the Laotian border?

Dan Hudson

Maybe 20 kilometers or so. But there were two problems in identifying that. Number one is we didn't have maps. And that was probably one of the first and most astonishing things. The maps we had were really leftovers from the French. They showed roads that didn't exist because they hadn't been used for more than a decade and were overgrown. And then there were roads that had been built subsequently that were there that were not on these maps from the 1940s or '50s. So the maps were almost of no use to us. And the other thing is, is there's no demarcation of the border with Laos. So land navigation was extremely difficult, and we depended quite a bit on our Montagnards to guide us, kinda like Indian scouts. And we never went the same way twice. We tried to always use a different trail. We tried to leave the camp at the start of a patrol during the hours of darkness, move a few kilometers away from the camp, spend the night. If we were going toward the Laotian border, then we were usually blazing the trail. So there were some Montagnards at the front of the column with machetes who were hacking through the jungle, and we were pretty much going single file through a trail that we cut. I remember we had a medic who was very large, more than double the size of the Montagnards, and this was a curse for him because they would cut a small trail and you had to stoop to go through it. And every single vine and shrub seemed to have thorns, and every piece of vegetation was saying wait a minute when you tried to go through. So he would be behind me cursing and swearing because his rucksack and his uniform was being snagged by all these vines because he was bigger than the little path had been cut.

Interviewer

Who would decide the mission?

Dan Hudson

We would pretty much decide on our own. Given the very general mission, the camps along the border were supposed to be on border surveillance, and we were trying to find where North Vietnamese forces were infiltrating and try to interdict them. So we would sometimes fly over the area in a helicopter and say well, there's an area we can land. And the jungle on the border was extremely dense, and it was difficult just to find a place where you could set down a helicopter. The first time, in fact, our detachment trained our Montagnards on a heliborne assault. And we trained them, of course, to leap out of both sides of the helicopter and go as far as they could from the helicopter to set up a defensive position. And the very first heliborne assault that we planned, we saw a small islet in the middle of a river and we determined that was about big enough for one helicopter at a time to land. So we landed on that and we were planning on going in one direction from the little island. But as we landed there one helicopter at a time, we had told the Montagnards to jump out and provide security on both sides of the helicopter, so they did. And unfortunately, on one side of the little spit of land there in the river it was rather deep. So all the Montagnards who went off on that side went right under water. All the ones who went off on the other side could wade to the edge, which was very close, and then go up the hill on the near bank. And on that patrol, which was about ten days, the detachment commander had been planned to participate on that, and I was at the airfield to see them off. And on the first helicopter was some major from headquarters who told the captain he was being reassigned as part of a rotation plan. So the captain turned to me and said, "Well, it's your mission." And he handed me his rucksack and his rifle because I was out there just with a pistol on the airfield. And there I was off on a ten-day mission with his rucksack and his underwear and his rifle. So that was not the way that we had planned it. And before our heliborne assault, we had four Air Force Skyraiders that dropped napalm on the top of the jungle and went over strafing with their 20-millimeter cannons. And from my first helicopter, this looked very impressive with a napalm bursting on top of the jungle canopy. And then later as I was climbing up the hill and not far from the river where I saw a smoking piece of aluminum there. And I looked for all the effect on the ground, and the fact was is that the napalm burst on the top of the jungle canopy. And unless you happened to be standing underneath the aluminum napalm containers that came through the jungle canopy, there was no effect of the napalm bombing on anybody underneath the canopy. So that was the lesson. And then we got up the hill and we just started going in the direction we'd preselected, carving a path through this impenetrable jungle. And after a few days, we came to a camp and there was some brief shooting. There were no casualties on either side. The Viet Cong fled, and to the delight of our Montagnard soldiers, there were a lot of pigs in the camp. When we were back in the camp, we would buy one pig per month for about 450 to 500 Montagnards. So they didn't get too much meat. But they immediately slaughtered the pigs and we had a feast, and the Montagnards were gorging themselves on the pigs. And whatever they could carry, the rice supplies and so forth they did, and whatever we couldn't carry away we burned. And then we continued on our way.

Interviewer

Tell us about some of the most interesting missions.

Dan Hudson

Contact with the enemy was just through meeting engagement. We would be going down a trail or an old road, and the Viet Cong would be on the same trail going the opposite direction. And then there would be a brief firefight or sometimes a longer firefight, but never more than half an hour that I experienced. And that would be it and one side or the other would usually withdraw. Now, after about four months, I got reassigned to another camp as part of this rotation program, which was in my opinion a very ill-advised program to rotate people so entire teams would not be rotating out of country at one time. But we had sent a group of our troops out with a couple of trucks to cut wood, so the fuel that the indigenous troops used for their cooking was wood. And they would go out ever few days with a couple of trucks and cut timber or pick up brush and haul it back. Well, we'd sent a couple of these trucks out along a road, and the road was extremely narrow and you were kinda driving your way through brush on both sides. So they walked into some Viet Cong coming the other way and they opened fire, and the woodcutting group ran several kilometers back to camp. And I was returning to camp by helicopter, and when I got off the helicopter there was a lotta commotion and a patrol was being organized to go out and see if we could salvage these trucks. And it was fairly chaotic. And as soon as I came back, the detachment commander said I'm going to go on this little operation, and I tried to slow things down to make sure that we're a little bit better organized. There was another American with me, a sergeant who was also new to the camp. In fact, I'd only met him once, didn't know him very well, had only talked to him for a few minutes before going out with him on this patrol. We had about two platoons or about 30 soldiers in each of our groups with the requisite interpreters and radio operators. So for radios, we had an old World War II PRC-10 radio, an FM radio, and we carried that to talk to any helicopters that we may have been able to get in the vicinity. Normally, when we went on the patrol in these early days, once we walked out of radio range of the camp, which was usually an hour or two, we were completely on our own. There was no artillery support. There was no mechanism to call for air support of any type. So we were less capable than Custer's troops because we didn't have horses. So we were strictly moving on foot. And in this case we had some trucks. And I felt that being in a vehicle was the most dangerous place to be, so I didn't like to be in a vehicle. And we had two types of trucks, two-and-a-half-ton trucks from World War II with the old U-shaped door on the side and some three-quarter ton trucks. And if I had to be in a vehicle, then I would ride in the back of a three-quarter-ton truck because it was the closest to the ground. If I had to dismount that truck I wanted to be in the back of the truck. And the most dangerous place was to be in the front of the truck in the driver or passenger's side because if somebody opened up on an ambush, boy, the people in the front of the truck were usually lost.

Interviewer

Were the trails booby-trapped?

Dan Hudson

They certainly were. They were booby-trapped then with improved explosive devices without explosives. So

you've probably heard of punji stakes, and these are sharpened bamboo stakes that were just simply planted in the ground on the side of a trail. And they're extremely sharp, and if you walked into them in the underbrush it would go through your boot right away. We gave the Montagnards canvas boots that we bought from some manufacture. They're Bata boots. I believe the Bata Shoe Company made those. But canvas boots provided no resistance to these, nor did our jungle boots if it went in the side. The jungle boots had some metal inserts to keep these little punji stakes from going into the bottom of our feet. But whenever we went out on an extended operation, it was not uncommon to have somebody at the point become a victim of these punji stakes. And it was a burden to have somebody with a relatively minor wound because he had to be carried and that would take four to six people rotating around to carry him in a poncho. We would make a stretcher with some ponchos or a blanket, and then we had to have several troops carry that person 'til we returned to camp. So just the infliction of a minor wound like that would serve the purpose for which it was intended.

Interviewer

Were those punji stakes tipped with poison?

Dan Hudson

Oh, people talk about dipping them in feces. Don't even know if that was necessary because the area was full of enough stuff to get you infected. I mentioned the thorns. If you weren't wearing gloves and you walked by one of these vines, there were hundreds of little tiny thorns. It wasn't a thorn you could pull out. It was just little tiny thorns that you'd have to pull out with tweezers later. So those would get infected and be very irritating. So it seemed like every vine wanted to say wait a minute, and every insect wanted to share your blood.

Interviewer

How about snakes and other wild animals?

Dan Hudson

There were a lot of snakes. We didn't worry about them too much, although there were lotta venomous snakes. My position in the patrol was always in the middle, so I wasn't the first one to encounter a snake. But they were a natural part of the environment. Again, at (inaudible) one time we had a camera team from one of the TV networks come in, and they wanted to go out on a patrol. So we set up a patrol just for them. I wasn't on it. But they went out and walked a few kilometers, and they spent the night there. And just before sun up, a tiger started dragging one of the Montagnard soldiers away, and there was a lotta shouting and shooting, and eventually the tiger let go of the soldier, and he was pretty badly mauled. And that was very exciting for the TV camera crew. And they came back to camp. But the real impact of this was not what happened to the soldier out on the patrol, but when the Montagnards came back to camp. And this was a very bad omen and called for several days of ceremonies and the sacrifice of a water buffalo, which was an exceptionally cruel thing to watch, and the consumption of rice wine and chanting and the gong playing and several days. So this was taken as a very negative omen by the Montagnards.

Interviewer

Talk about the mission with the woodcutting truck.

Dan Hudson

Yes. Because that was probably the saddest day for me. When we were within site, well, we could see the trucks that had gone out with the woodcutting party were on fire. So I stopped and we dismounted from our trucks and we left the trucks there. And we separated with the sergeant's platoon on the left side of the road and mine on the right side of the road. And we were moving slowly and cautiously because obviously this was an ideal situation to set up an ambush, hoping or expecting that we would come out there to try to salvage the trucks or find the enemy that had started the engagement. So we were trying to be very cautious. The vegetation was quite dense there, and I had no visibility with the platoon on the other side of the road, but I frequently communicated with the sergeant on the other side. So we had two types of radios. We had these old, antiquated FM radios, which were necessary to talk to a helicopter. And then we had some crystal-controlled AM radios. Just each radio with its crystal had a single frequency, so the sergeant and I each had a handheld radio that we used to communicate with each other. And then I was the only one that had the FM radio, which was on the back of a Vietnamese radio operator there who was carrying the thing. So when we started out on this operation, the people at the camp had called for a couple of helicopters, so presently a couple of armed helicopters started flying over. And I had to stop to use the FM radio. I was trying to use the radio, but communication was intermittent and not satisfactory. So my platoon had stopped, and the other platoon on the other side had continued on. And just as one of the helicopters was trying to find a place to land so we could communicate face to face to overcome the unsatisfactory radio communication, why, the other platoon walked into an ambush. The ambush was on my side of the trail. Had I not stopped to talk to the helicopter, I and my platoon would've walked into the ambush. As it turned out, the other platoon did and my American comrade and about half a dozen of the Montagnards were killed there in the first burst. His Montagnard medic carried his Vietnamese interpreter all the way back to camp, maybe ten or fifteen kilometers. The interpreter was shot in the eye, lost his right eye. The bullet went in his eye and came out his temple. And the Montagnard medic that we had trained put a bandage and a drain in his eye and carried him on his back all the way back to camp. In my case, my platoon there, several of them ran, several of them fired back. I returned fire. Every time I moved, there would be a furious burst of fire, and I would return some fire but I couldn't see who was shooting at me. So we withdrew in pretty much chaotic disorder. And I just collected a couple people in my platoon. There were a couple who were wounded. And I had the radio operator. The radio operator tried to run, but I held on to the handheld microphone so he couldn't run any further than the length of the microphone cord. But we got back to camp in the middle of the night, and a big fear in returning to camp, of course, is the people in the camp were on alert and we couldn't communicate with them well or signal that we were coming in. And at this stage in Vietnam, we didn't have any night-vision equipment whatsoever, and we didn't have any sophisticated gear that Special Forces and just the ordinary soldier is blessed to have today. So we were still using really antiquated weapons, antiquated equipment, and especially with the communications gear and the absence of

any night-vision capability, that really reduced our effectiveness.

Interviewer

What would happen when you would come into the village when they were on alert?

Dan Hudson

Well, in my case I had a radio. So I was able to call the camp and say, "I'm outside the camp," you know, make sure that the parameter security is not going to shoot anybody and give me some flashlight signal that it's okay to come into camp. As it turned out, the Montagnards had been streaming back to the camp in ones and twos over the course of the night and we got in safely. And a couple days later, we went out and recovered the bodies of the American and the Montagnards who'd been with him. And they were pretty much mowed down by machine gun. They were all just almost shoulder to shoulder there. So as fate had it, the helicopter came and caused my platoon to stop. And within one minute the other platoon continued on and walked into the ambush.

Interviewer

Talk about who these tribal people were and why they'd do this.

Dan Hudson

Well, the Montagnards were ethnically different from the Vietnamese. They're more Polynesian than Asian. And over the centuries, the Vietnamese had pushed them into the remote hinterland of Vietnam. The Montagnards were discriminated against by the Vietnamese, mistreated. The Vietnamese had utter contempt for them, considered them almost subhuman. And needless to say, the Montagnards didn't like the Vietnamese too much. The strategy of the American in working with these groups was to try to create some type of Vietnamese government presence there. This is a very complicated and indirect mission to establish Vietnamese government control over a vast area. So the Vietnamese government basically had control of areas where there were large Vietnamese population, which was on the extremely large, long coast where most of the populous was and in the south, in the Mekong Delta region. But in the remote mountainous highlands, it was mainly these indigenous tribes, and the tribes had a very primitive slash and burn agriculture. They would chop down the trees in an area and burn them, and that would fertilize the area for four or five years. And then when the soil was depleted again, they would move, abandon their village, build a new village and repeat the process over and over again. So this primitive agriculture probably can't exist on the planet very much longer. And sadly, I think most of the trees in Southeast Asia have disappeared now. But we were trying to work with these Montagnard tribes. It wasn't hard to win their hearts because the Americans respected them and treated them with dignity, so they liked the Americans. But one of the problems was, I believe it was in 1963, there were several Montagnard tribes who thought that they could declare their independence. So on a given day, the Montagnards in several Special Forces camps simply slaughtered all the Vietnamese Special Forces, and they had a declaration of independence, and they thought the Americans would support this. So needless to say, the American Special Forces, they were aghast at this because this is not something we could support, and those camps had to be closed. So some of the Montagnard troops in

these camps removed to other camps. And at the first camp at Plei Mrong we had a company of troops who'd been moved from the area of Buon Ma Thuot for their south in Vietnam where this insurrection had been centered. And it was extremely difficult to explain to them that we couldn't support their desire for independence because the U.S. government policy was to support the South Vietnamese government. And again, since these people were relatively primitive they didn't have the concept of a South Vietnamese government owning the territory of where they lived. A very crude analogy would be the American Indians trying to discuss that there's a United States government somewhere in a place called Washington and it owns this area. And they would say, "Well, how can some other government own it or have sovereignty over us? We've been here for centuries." So the winning the hearts and minds thing, it's very easy to win somebody's hearts because the Viet Cong would come to these villages and tax them, demand the rice and so forth, and these people were living a very impoverish existence thing. So they didn't have any difficulty distinguishing who the good guys were and who the bad guys were. Winning people's minds is a little bit more difficult. If you can't provide security for these isolated villages, then the villagers know that the Viet Cong can come in at any time and demand whatever and terrorize them. This would be followed by Vietnamese military forces who would come in and punish them because they had provided material support to the Viet Cong. So they were in a situation where they would suffer from the government forces and suffer from the Viet Cong. So winning people's minds is similar to the current situation in Afghanistan. Unless we can provide a guarantee of security against guerrilla forces that can be as brutal as they desire, it's difficult to win the people's minds. And that was basically the situation in Vietnam. The government and American forces were never able to provide security in these remote areas. So winning their minds is a difficult concept.

Interviewer

The Montagnards were fighting the Viet Cong and the NVA even though they didn't have a lot of respect for the South Vietnamese.

Dan Hudson

Yes. Well, partly they were being paid. The program was called the CIDG Program, the Civilian Indigenous Defense Group. And they were not part of the Vietnamese military. They were civilians as the term would imply. And if they wanted to quit they could. As long as they didn't take a weapon with them that was okay. And when there was a misfortune, like an engagement with casualties, some of 'em would decide to quit. We had another problem when we had a mortar attack on the camp and we had a number of people killed and wounded.

Interviewer

This is the main camp?

Dan Hudson

At our base camp, yes. So we had a number of casualties and some of these Montagnards had been killed where Montagnards had been transferred from a closed camp way to the south of us. So the Montagnards were animists and there were spirits in everything. Very difficult for Americans to comprehend and completely unpredictable. But

one thing that was important to them is that they had to be buried where they were born, and if they weren't buried where they're born, why, their soul would wander forever. So getting killed was unfortunate, but having your soul wander forever was completely unacceptable. So we explained to our own headquarters that we needed to have these coffins removed and transported down to Buon Ma Thuot or wherever the troops had originally come from, and it was not the American policy to move the indigenous troops around. So it essentially came, okay, you've gotta get them out of here and promise 'em they'll be returned or, you know, probably have to close the camp. So we finally got permission to have a couple helicopters come and pick up these coffins, take 'em into Pleiku. What happened to them after that, I'm not sure. But this eliminated a completely impossible situation. Another example of the interaction with this animist philosophy, we would go to various villages and provide medical care for the ill, mainly children and the elderly in the villages. And we stopped at one village, which was still in the process of being constructed, and the Montagnards would live in these very large, long wooden buildings on stilts, and maybe 20 to 40 people living inside one communal building. So this village was almost complete, and we stopped there and provided medical care. And about a week later, we were on the same trail and we came to the same village and the village had been abandoned. And since the trees had been nearly cut and burned and crops had been planted we couldn't figure this out. But we continued down the trail for a few more hours, and we saw this group cutting trees and building new houses. So we asked through our interpreters why had they moved the village. And they explained that when we had come to the village, about a week later one of the Americans had sat on a very large rock at the center of the village. And according to them, this rock had a very important spirit, and sitting on that rock would've enraged that spirit. And they abandoned the village because of fear of the consequences of having somebody not treat that spirit with respect. There was no way we could've known that that particular rock had a particularly important spirit for that particular village. But that was a consequence. On the positive side, probably the only time in my life that I had an inspiration was to use this belief in spirits. I would go around the parameter of our camp, and we had bunkers with machine guns in them. And when it rained, why, the machine guns would get rusty and we would try to explain to the Montagnards that when it rains, when it gets wet the weapons will rust and you have to clean them so that if you need them in an emergency they'll work. But this typical American explanation of cause and effect had no affect on having the Montagnards do it. And one day, I simply had one of the Montagnards and I said, "Look, the machine gun has a spirit and the spirit likes to be attended to every day." The next day every single machine gun in the entire camp was being disassembled and reassembled and oiled. And then I had to tell them that not all the spirits want to be attended to at the same time every day. But after that, when they related it to something they understood in their own spiritual context, why, there was no problem maintaining the machine guns. So that was my only inspiration. And again, it highlights the importance of understanding the culture of the people that you're working with. Otherwise, you won't be as effective as you could be.

Interviewer

How long were at the base camp by the Laotian border?

Dan Hudson

I was there for four months, and then I went to the second camp, Plei Do Lim, which was southeast of Pleiku. And I was there for four months.

Interviewer

Doing the same thing?

Dan Hudson

Doing the same thing, yes. I was the executive officer in a different camp and doing exactly the same thing. That's the camp where the American soldier with me was killed. And just to show that we weren't too bright, we went out again on a third little patrol to recover these trucks. Now we had two sets of trucks that had been set on fire. So this time we went down the same road, and I stopped much further from these trucks. And I stopped at a point where both the road and the terrain sloped downhill toward where the trucks were. So since I wanted to communicate with the camp before we moved any further, I stopped at this high ground. And we were putting a long-wire antenna up in the trees so that we could do this communication. And we sent a small number of Montagnards down the hill. We just plucked out all the guys who were carrying this heavy Browning automatic rifle, a World War I weapon that weighed almost 20 pounds, about a fifth as much as the Montagnards. And we sent them down to see if there was anybody closer to the trucks. And they saw some Viet Cong there and they started shooting at them. And when they started shooting, then there was a tremendous cacophony of fire as hundreds of weapons started shooting, and they were just firing everything they had for a minute or two. So the little Montagnard patrol we'd sent down in advance of our group while we were trying to stop for a communications break had inadvertently triggered a huge ambush that had been prepared for us. So had we not stopped there, had we continued, we would've run into an overwhelming ambush. So we withdrew hastily from that.

Interviewer

Did you guys ever do any ambushes yourselves?

Dan Hudson

Yes. We would set up security ambushes around our camp because the Viet Cong would come in and try to shoot at the camp at night or set up a mortar position and fire mortar rounds into the camp. So the 60-millimeter mortars we had had a range of a little over a kilometer. The 81-millimeter mortars that we had, or the 82-millimeter Chinese and Soviet mortars the Viet Cong had had a range of about four kilometers. So we would try to set up ambush patrols at night to ambush anybody who might've been coming toward the camp to attack at night. We didn't really have the capability to move into Laos to try to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail and set up a large scale ambush. So the Viet Cong always had the initiative. We were in fixed camps, so the guerrilla force could pick when and where they wanted to attack, and we were much more bound to roads and to known trails and our camp. So it's not too difficult to see that we're leaving the camp on a patrol. This is why we tried to leave during the hours of darkness to

get some measure of security and maybe of surprise. But yes, we would try to set up ambushes, but it was much more difficult to get intelligence on when and where the enemy is. And again, this is early in the war, so we didn't have the advantage of aerial reconnaissance or electronic eavesdropping and so forth. It was pretty much where do you think the Viet Cong are right now. And then again, we were working with our South Vietnamese counterparts who had a different prospective then say we did. You know, we were brash. We'd say okay, the Americans are here. We're going to win this war in short order. So I remember at one time our detachment commander was proposing to his Vietnamese counterparts, the Vietnamese camp commander, he said, "Well, I think we should have an operation over here," pointing at the map. And the South Vietnamese said, "Well, I think we should have an operation over here." And the American commander would say, "But the intelligence shows that the Viet Cong is over here." And the Vietnamese would say, "Yes. We should have an operation over here." So the Vietnamese officer would take maybe ten years or so to go from second lieutenant to first lieutenant. So the Vietnamese officers knew that they were in the war for the duration of the war, whereas the Americans knew that they were there for a year. So they had a very much more cautious approach toward launching these operations where there was a higher probability of contact with the enemy. So that was another reality of the situation that the South Vietnamese were not inclined to be as aggressive in launching offensive operations as we were.

Interviewer

Where did you spend your last four months?

Dan Hudson

The four months I went to An Khe. And at An Khe, we had a B detachment, which was at that time supervising ten other A detachments. And An Khe was on a main road between the coastal town of Quinn Yan and the interior city of Pleiku. And Pleiku was the capital of one of these four core tactical zones. It was the second corps tactical zone. And it was a medium-sized city about as far away from the coast as you could get. So An Khe was halfway between the coastal town of Quinn Yan and Pleiku. And it'd been a French Garrison town when the French were there prior to 1954. There was an airfield there that the French had built that we had improved. There were some old villas surrounded by barbwire that we knew to be mined so that we didn't go close to those. And our Special Forces camp there, the B detachment, instead of 12 Americans we had 20-some. So we had a small headquarters with a commander and the executive officer an Adjutant, an intelligence officer, and operations officer and a logistics officer. And my new assignment there at that camp was to be the Adjutant or the administrative officer. And I still went out on patrols, but more infrequently. And then we had some Montagnard troops there who had come from the north of our area. So we both operated with our own Montagnard troops patrolling in the local area. And then my main mission was to help with the administration of the ten subordinate A detachments. And normally, a B detachment would control four A detachments, but we had ten. So it was a tremendous administrative burden. We had no augmentation or additional personnel to take care of ten as opposed to four. So that was interesting. One thing I did as the Adjutant is each month at the end of the month go to Na Trang and pick up the operational

funds. And the operational funds were about 12 to 14 million piastres, which came in two large mailbags. So this amounted to about 150 pounds of cash.

Interviewer

How many dollars?

Dan Hudson

At the time, the official rate was 73 piastres to the dollar, so it was a couple hundred thousand dollars. So a lotta money for a lieutenant who was making 250 dollars a month. And one time I went to Na Trang, picked up this money and I got on a small courier plane, a U2 Otter, I think it was, and that plane flew from Na Trang to Quinn Yan. It was supposed to continue on to An Khe and Pleiku, but there was some type of maintenance problem, or maybe the crew just wanted to stay in Quinn Yan for the night. And they parked at some distant area of the runway, and they said, "Well, we'll get somebody to come out and pick you up." So I got off the plane with my two mailbags full of money and my little small suitcase, and I waited and waited and waited in the blazing sun and nobody came for me. So I thought well, I've gotta get off the runway here, so I started dragging these bags, but I soon realized the bags were too heavy for me to drag, and plus if I dragged them they might've ripped open. So I thought and thought and said what I can do. So I thought well, I have no alternative but to leave this money here. So I left my quarter of a million dollars sitting there in the two mailbags and went to get some help. And after a while, I found somebody who put me in contact with the Special Forces liaison detachment in Quinn Yan. They gave me one of the old Jeeps we had, and I drove out to the end of the airfield with my fingers crossed, and fortunately, the two mailbags full of cash were still there. And I breathed a sigh of relief, and spent the night there, not telling anybody what was in my mailbags. They would've presumed it was mail, I guess. And then the next day, I took one of these old Jeeps and I saw a convoy of fuel trucks. In the meantime, things had changed in An Khe. So from the 20-some Americans we had there, the first air cavalry division had arrived in Vietnam starting I think in October 1964. And they arrived with about 20,000 troops and between 400 and 500 helicopters. So things changed completely in An Khe. And the reason the American troops had come in is because starting in February '65, why, there were some large-scale attacks against Americans. That's when President Johnson started routine bombing of North Vietnam. And the operational situation was such that if we had not introduced American forces, South Vietnam probably would've collapsed in 1965 because most of the Special Forces camps were completely cut off from ground transportation. They had to be resupplied by air. The South Vietnamese forces were not able to defend against the thousands of North Vietnamese troops that were infiltrating in. So American forces came in to stabilize the operational security system situation. And then we continued with that mode of operation until essentially we quit.

Interviewer

Give us your thoughts on the Vietnam War, a little about coming home, and what you would tell future generations.

Dan Hudson

Well, of course, the Vietnam War was a political and military fiasco. It's the mission of the political leaders of the

country to give the military a clear-cut mission, and President Johnson especially and his Secretary of Defense, Mr. McNamara, never did that. And to send troops into a conflict situation without a clear-cut mission and without a determination to win is irresponsible, if not criminal. And we never had the determination. So American forces in any conflict we enter into will probably have the technological superiority, and that was certainly the case in Vietnam and is the case in conflicts we're engaged in now. But the victor almost certainly will be the side with the determination and the will to win and stick it out. And America is known for having limited patience with a protracted war. So if we don't have the determination to win and we don't provide the resources at the front end of the conflict to win, it'll be very difficult and probably an unsatisfactory outcome.

Interviewer

Did you have any negative experiences when you came home from the public?

Dan Hudson

Well, when I came home from Vietnam I was flown into Travis Air Force Base in California. I got off the plane. I asked how I could get to San Francisco or Oakland, California where I had relatives, and I was just told, "Well, you could probably call a taxi." So there were no yellow ribbon ceremonies. There were no welcome home things. It was just get off the plane and move on to your next assignment. So that was certainly not the way it should've been done. I came back in 1965. At that time, there wasn't extreme public opposition of the war and nobody treated me with disrespect. Nobody asked me where I'd been or what I'd done really. And I went back to Fort Bragg to the Special Forces training group to train enlisted soldiers to be Special Forces soldiers. And after about eight or nine months back in the United States I went to Thailand again with Special Forces where we trained the first Thai troops to go to Vietnam. But later on, by 1968 when I came back from Thailand in December of '67, certainly in 1968 that was a tumultuous period of U.S. history where we had the Martin Luther King assassination and the Kennedy assassination. By that time I was back in the artillery, and my artillery battalion went without me to Chicago, went to back up the Chicago Police for the Democratic National Convention. So at that time, there were violent and unruly protests, the war was unpopular, morale in the military was low. In 1970 I went to Germany. The barracks were in deplorable condition. There were drug problems, race problems, no money to maintain equipment, a shortage of NCOs and junior officers. The entire military was in a terrible state because all the resources were going to the indecisive and war in Vietnam. And then having made a commitment to the Vietnamese people to defend them from communism, we simply quit and went home, and ultimately Congress cut off funds to sustain the South Vietnamese government and everything collapsed. So this had a very negative effect on our prestige, our political standing, our ability to influence the world. So it was a war that we could've won, should've won and didn't because we lost the political will.

Interviewer

What happened to the Montagnards?

Dan Hudson

The Montagnards have continued to be persecuted. And things I've read, it indicates about 90 percent of 'em have been wiped out.

Dan Hudson

After the North Vietnamese succeeded and reunited South Vietnamese, of course they sent hundreds of thousands of people into reeducation camps or concentration camps or prisons. So almost anybody who'd been in the South Vietnamese government or the South Vietnamese military was punished. And then the punishment was extended to the Montagnard tribes who'd cooperated with Americans. So combining the fact that the Vietnamese had contempt for them, plus the fact that they were fighting against the communists and against the North Vietnamese and against the Viet Cong, they suffered. And there are periodic articles about the continuing persecution of the Montagnards, and I think many of the tribes have been driven to extinction and they have certainly suffered. And their culture, even if just given global changes, their slash and burn agricultural thing probably couldn't have persisted very much longer in any case. But they are definitely suffering continuing persecution at the hands of the Vietnamese in spite of the fact that Vietnam is moving in the right direction. And I've talked to Americans who've returned to Vietnam for visits, and they're greeted warmly. It was 36 years on 30 April that the war ended, so the vast majority of the population's been born since the war was over so it's kind of history to them. And I talked to some students at East High last month about the Vietnam War, and it was as remote to them as the War of 1812.

Interviewer

What is your hometown?

Dan Hudson

I was born in Miami Beach and grew up in Miami, Florida.

Interviewer

So you would consider your hometown Miami, Florida?

Dan Hudson

Right.

Interviewer

What was your rank after one year in Vietnam?

Dan Hudson

I was a first lieutenant when I left Vietnam.