



## **Chris Wangsard**

Salt Lake City, Utah

Captain

Army

Infantry

"Escalation"

### **Interviewer**

Where were you born?

## **Chris Wangsard**

Huntsville, Utah. It's a wonderful small town.

### **Interviewer**

Where did you go to high school?

## **Chris Wangsard**

We moved to Ogden and I graduated from Ben Lomond High in Ogden.

### **Interviewer**

Can you tell us what you heard about Vietnam as you were growing up?

## **Chris Wangsard**

Absolutely nothing. I got appointed to West Point and intended to make a career in the Army, and of course while I was in West Point we started to hear a little about Vietnam.

### **Interviewer**

And you graduated there in '63 I believe?

## **Chris Wangsard**

Graduated in '63.

### **Interviewer**

What happened after that?

## **Chris Wangsard**

Well, I went in the infantry and my first assignment I decided I wanted to go to Germany. So I went to an infantry unit in an armored division in Germany, and spent two and a half years there and then those of us that were infantry officers, we were pulled out of Germany early and sent to Vietnam. Sometimes with some schooling before we got there.

### **Interviewer**

And you got there fairly early on?

## **Chris Wangsard**

Well I was in Vietnam essentially all of 1967. So that's sort of—I arrived right at the peak of the build-up and then after that continued through '67, peaked about the first of '68 and then you remember after the big Tet Offensive, then U.S. forces in Vietnam started to decline after that.

### **Interviewer**

What were your thoughts when you knew you would be assigned there?

## **Chris Wangsard**

I didn't think about it a whole lot, it was where I had had been ordered to go and that was not a big surprise to me. I had watched Vietnam building up and I had known for some time that being an infantry officer I would wind up there. The moment that the reality hit me, I got off the plane and there was a bus there to take us out to be sorted out to go to our units, and I sat down and looked out the window, and there was a really heavy metal grate over it and I thought, "Oh, that's to keep grenades out. I think I'm in Vietnam."

### **Interviewer**

What happened after that? What was your first assignment?

## **Chris Wangsard**

Well I had been sent to the Special Forces school in about the six months before going there and was assigned to the 5th Special Forces Group. Got flown up to their group headquarters at Nha Trang and was assigned as the assistant plans officer and then plans officer for the Special Forces Group.

### **Interviewer**

Where you a lieutenant at that time?

## **Chris Wangsard**

I was a captain by that time.

### **Interviewer**

Tell us about some of your experiences over there.

## **Chris Wangsard**

Well the first part of it, of course, was to learn what the Special Forces Group was doing—what we were doing and my experiences were a little different from most Americans in Special Forces Group, a small and elite group. We were running camps along the borders of Vietnam and those camps were in operation before I got there. In those camps we recruited essentially mercenaries, but they were also the native, indigenous Montagnard people in the mountain areas and then some groups called the Cao Dai, which was a religious group, and the Hoa Hao which was more a political group down in the Mekong Delta.

These people were not at all like the coastal Vietnamese. They were tribal people, ethnically very different, spoke their own tribal languages and what we were trying to do was to identify and maybe stop infiltration of the North

Vietnamese and their supplies across the borders from Laos and Cambodia.

**Interviewer**

Were these people loyal to the South or did you have a hard time convincing them to fight?

**Chris Wangsard**

That's a very good question. Your first question, no. There had never been good relations between the Montagnard and the coastal Vietnamese. You could think of them as a lot like the Kurds in Iraq and there was the South Vietnamese government essentially was not very interested in what we were doing. They understood that the Montagnard people had their own goals and they were rarely aligned with the South Vietnamese. The Montagnards responded to us and liked us, but even we always knew that we couldn't really count on the loyalty of the people in our camps.

We always knew we should assume that we had a certain number of Viet Cong sympathizers in our camps and we always knew that the first loyalty, particularly of the Montagnards, was likely to be to having their own self-rule nation and they were happy to take our training and equipment, and our pay which was—they were mercenaries, we'd pay them cash each month. Generally they cooperated with the U.S. but not the South Vietnamese.

**Interviewer**

You supervised a company, is that correct?

**Chris Wangsard**

Actually I was a planner at the group headquarters and had responsibility for planning things. My key responsibility was when we opened new camps or, in one instance, we closed an existing camp. But I did go out to those camps to understand what they were doing.

**Interviewer**

So did those guys go out on patrols?

**Chris Wangsard**

That's precisely what a camp did.

**Interviewer**

Can you give us some experiences that occurred during that time?

**Chris Wangsard**

You know, my job as a planner was—I think I had fallen into one of the few relatively safe jobs in Special Forces. I got mortared a few times when I was in those camps. The most serious attack that I was ever in was actually right in Nha Trang, which we thought of as a very safe area, but the Viet Cong set us up very cleverly. They came in and staged a ground attack against the camp perimeter. They didn't do that unless they had a lot of people and were serious. Once they got us up and running to defend the perimeter, then they dropped a bunch of mortars right in the area where we lived and there were 17 people hit just in moments. They were very clever.

**Interviewer**

So these 17 people were U.S. Army?

**Chris Wangsard**

Yes. That was the Special Forces camp and those were all U.S. Army people.

**Interviewer**

Any other particular experiences?

**Chris Wangsard**

Well I saw a great deal of the country, got to think maybe I knew just a little bit about the people, but the largest feeling was also a very uncomfortable feeling that oh dear, I really don't understand very much about these people or what they're thinking or what their motivations are. We just hope that they're okay with us, but obviously a great many of them were absolutely not.

**Interviewer**

What was the morale of the servicemen at that time?

**Chris Wangsard**

Well, I was in Special Forces; these were elite seasoned professional soldiers. Morale was not an issue with Special Forces.

**Interviewer**

When they would go out on patrols, what was their job?

**Chris Wangsard**

Kind of two things. Not sure which came first, they went together. To try to gather intelligence about what was the other side bringing into Vietnam and then, to the extent that they could do it, to ambush those people and cut off that infiltration.

**Interviewer**

Were you there during most of your tour of duty or did you have any other assignments?

**Chris Wangsard**

For a brief while I had an assignment at the Army Headquarters in Saigon. It wasn't very exciting and I don't remember a lot about it. It was planning and coordinating things.

**Interviewer**

While you were there did you formulate any ideas or attitudes about the war?

**Chris Wangsard**

Short answer is no, although I certainly tried to. I had access to higher-level information than most people in Vietnam had and a lot of it. And I tried to sort that out. I never reached much of a definite conclusion. It's useful to think of the war in Vietnam as many wars. And you'd see something would seem to be going well in one province, and badly in another and I didn't really get that sorted out while I was there. I did have one experience at the end of

my tour, which brought a lot of things together for me.

Very near the end of my tour I was in a briefing that the Special Forces Group conducted for General William Westmoreland, the overall Vietnam commander. I was in operations and not intelligence, but I knew the intelligence side, so I listened to what he was told and I knew that our staff would tell him the same thing that his staff would tell him. And we briefed him about where the main North Vietnamese units were in quite a bit of detail. I left fairly soon after that and then the big Tet Offensive came within days of my getting back. Well suddenly I could see that virtually everything that we had told him about what the other side was doing was deeply and profoundly wrong. So at that moment I had a very clear personal knowledge, understanding, that at the very highest level in Vietnam we don't know what's going on and the things that we don't know are not small things, they're big important things.

### **Interviewer**

Can you talk about those things?

### **Chris Wangsard**

Well, where all of the major North Vietnamese units were. I mean we were telling him down to the level of where the 324 B Division was and all of it was just completely – it was rather as if Vietnam is somewhat like the size and shape of California, kind of mirror imaged. It curves the other way, the ocean's on the east. But picture that we were in San Francisco and we were telling him, and I'm sure his staff was telling him, that the enemy folks were on the eastern side of the Sierras and some down in Mexico and some in eastern Oregon when, point of fact, it had to be the case that at the moment he was being told all those things the very units we were talking about, big units, important units, were precisely on the other side of the country and they had to have been sitting just outside each of the major Vietnamese cities. The Tet Offensive couldn't have happened as it did unless those were the facts.

### **Interviewer**

What was the reason for that lack of intelligence?

### **Chris Wangsard**

You would have to ask Westmoreland.

### **Interviewer**

When the Tet Offensive occurred, the intelligence had no idea that they had such large forces and the location of where they were and it took them completely by surprise.

### **Chris Wangsard**

They had no idea where the major North Vietnamese units were. Had no idea that the other side was capable of doing what they undertook to do in Tet. Now in hindsight we know they paid terrible, terrible prices for that, but William Westmoreland had testified before Congress late in 1967. He was using phrases like "Light at the end of the tunnel," and that we were winning in Vietnam and that the Tet Offensive showed everybody that the American understanding of what the other side was capable of was just profoundly inadequate and wrong.

## **Interviewer**

Do you believe that that could be one of the main reasons for the outcome of Vietnam?

## **Chris Wangsard**

In a very, very ironic sense. The Tet Offensive was a military disaster for the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese. They believed that there would be a general uprising of the Vietnamese population, which would resolve the war in their favor very quickly. Not only did that not happen, the Viet Cong as a force in the South, which it had taken decades to establish, was essentially decimated and really never recovered at the end of the war. The Tet Offensive was a military disaster for the Viet Cong and almost as much a disaster for the North Vietnamese Army. It was a disaster politically in the United States because it was so clear that all of the promises and statements about how well we were doing in Vietnam were simply not true, and public opinion turned strongly against the war, never recovered. So in that ironic sense, sure the Tet Offensive—the Tet Offensive was actually a three-part thing that went on through a great deal of 1968 but its affect on American political opinion and will in the United States was decisive.

## **Interviewer**

We've heard that there was a lot of drug use by enlisted men over there. Did you notice any of that?

## **Chris Wangsard**

No, absolutely not. Yes, I heard that, too. I think I would say I would never have seen that with elite highly trained, well-motivated Special Forces soldiers; that wasn't who we were. I think it's true that drug use became very common in Vietnam. I think that after Tet, and as the war seemed increasingly to be a stalemate and to be losing its purpose, I think that became more prevalent. I wasn't there then. Didn't see that.

## **Interviewer**

The withdrawal was in the '70s I believe, wasn't it?

## **Chris Wangsard**

Well the withdrawal was gradual over time and remember when—after Nixon was elected he changed commanders, Creighton Abrams became the American commander? Great emphasis was placed on "Vietnamization," and turning the war over to the Vietnamese and trying to avoid American casualties. During this time, the number of American ground forces steadily declined from mid-'68 through sometime in '72 or '73 when the last American ground troops were out.

## **Interviewer**

What are your thoughts at this point on fighting the war?

## **Chris Wangsard**

I have thought about it a great deal afterwards and read a great deal about it; most of my thinking happened after I got back. When I first got back I got busy, left the Army, resigned my commission, went to law school, good to be busy. Never wanted to think about it again. Just wanted to be away from Vietnam. Nobody in law school wanted to

hear about Vietnam. Later it became really important to me to try to understand what had happened, what did we miss, how did it go so wrong? So I've read about it, talked with other people who were there, thought about it. Hard to sum that up concisely.

### **Interviewer**

Think about speaking to future generations, of someone who lived it and had been there and saw the aftermath, what would you say to future generations about that war?

### **Chris Wangsard**

First thing that comes to mind to answer that question would be that—America has never come to grips with what, to me, is the most important lesson of Vietnam, which is still playing out in Afghanistan and Iraq. In Vietnam we had an "ism" to be against: communism. Now it's terrorism. We never asked very good questions about what we were for. And we never asked serious questions: Could it be that America does not have the power to control the outcome here? What would it cost to control the outcome? So there were, in my view, we might have learned really, really important lessons in Vietnam about the limits of American power. I don't think we ever seriously asked that question. We never answered it and we're, in my view, failing to ask it in a serious way again now in Afghanistan and in Iraq.

### **Interviewer**

Are there any areas that we missed about your experience over there that you'd like to share with us?

### **Chris Wangsard**

Truth is I fell into a relatively safe job. There was an advantage to that. I got to see a lot more and I got to know a great deal about what was going on in Vietnam. Typical American tour was to be in one place, not travel around very much. My job actually took me to almost every part of the country. I got to see quite a bit about the Vietnamese and I came home with a strong feeling of admiration for them. We don't acknowledge enough what great harm and damage we did to those people with our way of bringing our war into their country. We did terrible damage to the Vietnamese people and that sticks in my mind now as much as anything about it. I'd like to go back. I've not gone back. I like the place. I always saw things that I respected and admired about the Vietnamese and how well they adapted and wish we hadn't done such harm to them.

### **Interviewer**

I was over there and came back with the same kind of feelings. I'd like you to talk more about the people.

### **Chris Wangsard**

That was a French word. And there isn't a good word for those people. The French used that as somewhat of a word of contempt, but that was our word for them, the Montagnards.

### **Interviewer**

What was the Vietnamese daily life like? What damage did we do?

## **Chris Wangsard**

Sure. Well, yeah, the camps. Wonderfully exotic. These people were living—they were a 16th century, 17th century tribal society. Primitive agriculture, hunting not at all with modern hunting weapons. In the camps that we recruited we didn't have just soldiers in our camps, or living right next to our camps, were their whole families. Extended generations of people, little kids, women, kids; we lived in their society and their whole society was there. That was one of the keys to getting them to cooperate with us was the notion that this is your territory, these people are coming through it, how about we give you some more modern weapons and you help us shoot the people who are coming through your territory. A fair number of them bought off on that program.

We then turned them into the enemies of the side, which was going to win the war. And by the way, the Montagnard people were not all—we didn't recruit them universally to our side of the war and, in fact, we now know that the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong did a rather better job than we did. So the people who helped us became the losers in the war and we didn't evacuate them from Vietnam, they stayed behind. Some of them got out.

One wonderful, inadequate, but wonderful story, the Special Forces Association made contact with some of the Montagnard people who got out. We put together a fundraiser, raised money, bought land in the mountains of North Carolina. Some of those people have gone and settled in the mountains of North Carolina on land that we bought for them. I think the land is owned in a trust or in an association; it didn't go to them individually. But we made them the losers in the war and they didn't come home with us.

### **Interviewer**

What got them to trust you as Americans? You are the foreigners. How did you convince them that your ideas are the best ideas?

## **Chris Wangsard**

Well I didn't do that part of it personally so I'm pretty reluctant to comment about that. The people in the camps who had the direct responsibility for that had to figure out how to do it, and I wouldn't try to speak for them. I'm sure each of them had their own way of going about it. I wouldn't try to speak for them.

### **Interviewer**

The forces that were running the war under Westmoreland. What was the intelligent plan of getting those camps and getting the Montagnards on our side?

## **Chris Wangsard**

Oh no, I don't think anyone ever had any idea of that. William Westmoreland's strategy, which Special Forces were not directly involved in this, we were somewhat a side effort. His strategy was to find the large main force Viet Cong, North Vietnamese Army units and destroy those units with the idea that that would create an opportunity for the South Vietnamese government to govern effectively. That didn't happen, it didn't work. I tend to think it was not ever do-able.



## **Interviewer**

Were you aware of what was going on at home? That people were protesting?

## **Chris Wangsard**

You put your question in terms of after Tet, well after Tet I was home. I was out of Vietnam so I was at home when those things were happening. Well, I knew there was strong controversy about the war and that made good sense to me. Well, the protests against the war, and some protests for the war, were not conducted politely nor do I see any reason why they had to be. That war was worth getting very angry about.

To this day if we start to talk about Vietnam we will quickly find ourselves in the hawk/dove argument, which was never resolved about Vietnam. It was never resolved because we never talked about the real issue. We said we were talking about Vietnam but there are very few Americans who knew enough about Vietnam to have an argument about Vietnam. The people, the place, their war, the argument about Vietnam is an argument about America and America's place in the world, and I don't think we've ever resolved that much or that's fully resolvable. That's what the really ugly arguments were about and we could still start that argument today and people would strongly disagree with each other.

## **Interviewer**

That's true. Did you have any experience when you returned, of local people harassing you because you went over there and fought?

## **Chris Wangsard**

No, I never had any experience like that. When I went back into civilian life, I went to law school. Nobody was interested in Vietnam but I never had any of those kinds of experiences nor did I ever talk directly with anyone who said that that had happened to them. Just never saw that. There's no doubt. We didn't have any victory parades, but then we didn't have a victory to parade about. There was an aspect of Vietnam, which, I suppose it was well intentioned, but it was hard on people, the transition out of Vietnam and back into civilian life was very strange. You went to Vietnam as an individual on a commercial airliner with flight attendants, and food, and drinks on the way over and on the way back. Then you arrived as an individual and, assuming that you survived, you came home as an individual. You got off the airplane, you went into the airport.

There was no transition to help people understand what they had gone through. Suddenly we were individuals, we were separated from the people that we'd served with. That I think made adjustment even more difficult for Vietnam vets. And I think that's being done somewhat better today. Today, units deploy as units, they come home as units, and they try to take some measurements to work as a group with the same people that you served in combat with to make that transition back to civilian life. That's a good idea. I hope it makes a lot of difference.

## **Interviewer**

Is there anything else you'd like to share with future generations?

## **Chris Wangsard**

Well I guess the people I'd like to talk to about, if anybody is willing to listen to anything about the Vietnam experience and apply it to the future, I hope that it would be politicians and leaders who would listen to that, and be very careful about where you use military force, understand what the goals are and don't try to do it on the cheap. If you're going to do it, either acknowledge that you shouldn't get in it, or support it adequately. Look carefully at: are there some limits of American? Don't go pounding your chest for domestic political advantage at the cost of killing 19- and 20-year-old Americans, and lots and lots of innocent foreign people. Don't do that.

## **Interviewer**

You had kind of a difference experience than lots that we've had so it's kind of interesting to pick your brain and see what you were thinking before and after. Sounds to me like if you were not in law school you may have been a protestor.

## **Chris Wangsard**

I should have told you about that. One of the things that I did as I sorted this all out, I joined an organization, an anti-war, against the war organization.

## **Chris Wangsard**

After I got home and sorted through what I felt about the war, I joined an anti-war organization composed entirely of graduates of the three military academies: West Point, Annapolis and Air Force. And we had, by the end, a few hundred members in that organization; graduates of the three military academies. The war was that divisive and unsatisfactory.

## **Interviewer**

What did that organization do?

## **Chris Wangsard**

I didn't make it myself, but I know that that organization marched very publicly in protests in San Francisco and New York, I suppose Washington, D.C. I was in law school here and didn't make those. But that did happen and I'm glad I did that.

## **Interviewer**

What can you say about the homecoming of a lot of the infantry men who were exposed to some shocking and terrible situations?

## **Chris Wangsard**

You know, I didn't see that myself. I'm a little bit skeptical about how much of that there was. I think the stories might have grown over time. I didn't see it, I don't know. It was not part of my experience.

## **Interviewer**

I have to tell you that after going over there and looking at all of the things that they've got, the North Vietnamese have propagandized a lot of the places but you kind of read between the lines a little bit and it was tough duty for a

lot of those grunts.

**Chris Wangsard**

One of the sad things that I read about not too long ago was an article, I think in "The Economist" saying that the North Vietnamese government actively discourages its vets from telling their stories from Vietnam. This author was saying that's because the North Vietnamese don't want their veterans' stories upsetting the United States. They want good relationships and trade with the U.S. If they are repressing the stories of their vets, that's terrible. And you know really it was ultimately their stories about which would explain why Vietnam turned out why it did, they would have to be Vietnamese stories. That was all decided by the Vietnamese. We really haven't heard much of their stories and they have to have great, great stories of courage and sacrifice. They were very, very brave people.

**Interviewer**

They lost a million or more combatants and civilians combined, I think.

**Chris Wangsard**

Oh, huge numbers not counted. We have made a big issue about MIAs, want them to account for it. They have hundreds of thousands of missing and I think there's no conceivable hope of ever accounting for those people and to have a missing son from a Vietnamese family is deeply disturbing to them and at least as disturbing as it would be to us, perhaps more so.

**Interviewer**

Did you witness on television the fall of Saigon?

**Chris Wangsard**

Yes, I did.

**Interviewer**

What were your feelings?

**Chris Wangsard**

Fall of Saigon, yes. I was very surprised. I thought oh...I guess I thought this will drag on as a stalemate for a very, very long time and I have no idea how it will turn out and I was very surprised to see it resolved so quickly.

**Interviewer**

What were your feelings when you saw the images?

**Chris Wangsard**

I think my strongest feeling was just well, it's finally over. I didn't try to predict a whole lot about what would happen after that. I never really deeply believed the notion that there would be a horrible communist blood bath and I don't think that really happened. I would not have wanted to go through one of their reeducation camps, but I think I just thought it's over.