

Transcription: Ken Wallingford

Today is Friday, August 14th, 2009. My name is James Crabtree and I'm interviewing Mr. Ken Wallingford. This interview is taking place at the Stephen F. Austin Building in Austin, Texas, and it is being conducted in support of the Texas Veteran's Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you for taking the time to talk to us today. And as you know, this interview is to record for posterity your memories of your time in service so future generations can hear your account, your story, and usually the first question we always start off with is just to tell us a little bit about your background, where you're from, and that sort of thing about your family, and ultimately what led you to enter the military.

Ken Wallingford: Well, I'm what they sometimes refer to military children or military brat. I was born in Munich, Germany, when my dad and mother were stationed over there back in 1948, and we stayed there, I think my dad was stationed there about 10 months, 11 months after I was born, so we came back to the states, and growing up in a military force environment. I just, you know, traveled all over the country with my parents, lived in different places from Florida to Maine to California to Omaha, Nebraska, to New Mexico and places like that. And so I finished high school in Miami, Florida, and went to military school. My dad was stationed in an Air Force base there, Homestead Air Force Base, and then went to school at Texas A&I University in Kingsville, Texas, which is now part of the A&M system. And then about two years into my college education I was drafted by the Army, and so I went to Houston for my induction physical, and about four months later got my notice that I was fit and qualified for duty, and I can remember sitting at the induction station there in downtown Houston at the time and all the Army guys were in one room, and then they had some Marines, you'll appreciate this, and the Air Force in there, and this Marine recruiter comes in and stands at the door and yells out these two names of these individuals, and said fall out and follow me, and you can hear these young men going down the hallway – but I don't want to be in the Marines! And so anyway, but growing up in the military, that's the only life I knew, and so it was somewhat natural to join the military even though I decided to go in the Army because I wanted to be a little more active I guess because I went to jump school. I went to basic and AIT ___ infantry training at Fort Polk, Louisiana. And then I wanted to go into Special Forces, and so part of that requirement is you had to go to Airborne school which is at Fort Benning, Georgia. And I went to that. It was actually a three-week program, but it took me four weeks because I had to get recycled during one of the phases because I couldn't do what they called parachute landing falls. And so I finally graduated from that and went to Fort Bragg, North Carolina for Phase 1 of Special Forces training. And I had a girlfriend back in Houston at the time and sometimes love can be a little persuasive, and so I chose an MOS at Special Force which was really not my interest, but that was medical because I knew my second phase of training if I had gone forward would put me at Fort Sam Houston, but I should've gone to Live Weapons, but as fate would have it... So I didn't do too well at the medical side of it and so forth, so after Phase 1, I left the program and waited for my orders to go to Vietnam because back then, this is 1969, September, when I went in, this would have been summer of 1970, you either go in to Vietnam, which the majority of the folks were at that time, and as most people know that have done any history and so forth, Vietnam was the longest war our country has ever been involved in, the most costly war as far as lives, and at that time monetarily was the most costly, and so I knew it was just a matter of time before I did go there. And so sure enough, I went in August of 1970. We landed at Cameron Bay, which is kind of in the northern part of Vietnam on the beach, and I can remember the plane opened its doors, we flew up on Flying Tiger Airlines, you know, the government contracted work, and everyone is wearing their OD green uniforms, and the stewardesses were not what you

would normally have expected to be young, attractive, so forth. I think these were the senior stewardesses as they called them at that time. I said well I guess they don't want us to have any fantasies or depression on the last flight out and so forth, so but landing at Cameron Bay, South Vietnam and the door opening, you just feel the immediate blast of the heat hitting you. It's like going to West Texas in the middle of the summertime. It's just very impressionable. But I spent about a week there before I got my assignment and then we went down to the southern part outside of Saigon, a place called Chuchi, and I was assigned to a mechanized unit, armored personnel unit, with the 25th Infantry Division. And so after a few months of being with that unit and going on some operations, I said you know, Americans, military folks, Army especially, are kind of clumsy and noisy. And I can remember the first operation we went out and there was probably about 8 or 9 of these APC units. We'd always set up in a circle out in the open area. I thought well this is just real good. The enemy can certainly just start shooting at you and whatever. Well, that first night, some of the guys, now I was brand new, I was a rookie and some of those guys had been there for -

You were a buck private -

Ken Wallingford: I was a Private E1. And so some of these guys were lighting up joints at dusk. I thought what is going on here? So to make a long story short and clamp some timeframes I went and talked to groups and whatever, I decided you know, there was a sniper school coming up, so I said sniper school, I've never shot a rifle and never gone hunting, it's a small group, blah-blah-blah-blah. And so I went to an in country sniper school that they had there in Vietnam for about a week, and then I was assigned as a sniper on the sniper team. But our first LT lieutenant was a West Point graduate with the mechanized unit, and one thing they teach those guys at that time that they are very good at and that's how to read a map. No matter where you are, they can find their spot on a map. But that's about all they were trained to do back then. No, it's a great school and so forth, but so I got on the sniper team and there was anywhere, it depends on the operation, 5 to 7 of us. 2 snipers, machine gun, radio guy, support and so forth and so on, and then they would put us, insert us in areas where there was activity. And sometimes you'd just sit there for a couple of days without seeing anything, and one of the purposes is to go into an area where there's a lot of activity, to conceal yourself and not move around, so forth and so on, so sometimes we'd go out on 10-day missions, and sometimes you'd see some activity and sometimes wouldn't or they'd have to extract you and put you in a different location. So I did that for probably about 10 months of the remaining one-year tour that I initially was on. Back then, they would deploy you to places like Vietnam for 12 months. If you went to Korea, I think it was a 14-month tour. Europe was maybe 12 or 18 months, something like that. And so I decided since I'd been there for a year. You kind of get acclimated, you know, being overseas and stuff, you kind of get acclimated to the lifestyle, the environment, so forth, and I knew that if I wanted to get out of the military early, because back then the military, at least the Army was offering what they called an early out program, where I could've gotten out 5 months early, and all I had to do was go back for a second tour of duty of 7 months and I would get to come home for 30 days for R&R and then go back. I said OK, I'll do that, because I didn't want to come back to the States, I didn't want to go to Europe, you know, play games and so forth, you know, after being in that kind of an environment and so forth, and I was fortunate that I was never wounded, a miracle in itself at that point, but I can remember the first time on that sniper team having to kill somebody. And when I've talked to school kids, I said you know, killing is never right under any circumstance, but sometimes especially in the military, you are trained to do that, and they are trained to defend themselves, the enemy, and kill you, the aggressor, whatever the case might be. But I always say it's never right to shoot somebody, but in a situation like military service when you're in a foreign country, and of course

at that time, I said I'd rather go fight the enemy on "their territory" than ours and so forth. And all we did in Vietnam, people argue forever until the end of time saying where were we right in going to Vietnam? Political war, controversial war. We fought them basically with one hand tied behind our back. We couldn't go above the DMZ, the demarcation line between South Vietnam and North Vietnam. But when I first got over there in September-October of 1970, the North Vietnamese were coming down into South Vietnam via Cambodia, which was the country on the western border of Vietnam, and then coming in. And the same unit I was initially assigned to had actually made it unauthorized but it delayed the war incursions into Cambodia because they were bringing all their food, armaments and stuff down there and then they were coming into South Vietnam, you know, undetected by coming down from the north as they did in '68, and the ___ offensive and so forth. So I can still remember vividly to this day where I was, the circumstances, the whole nine yards, and you become almost callous because you're trained to do it and whether it's the first one or the tenth one or the fiftieth one you shoot, and then the snipers had, at least the Army, had a motto, one shot, one kill, you don't miss, and so forth, not that I was good. I mean I just did my job. But I learned in time and especially we'll talk about in a few minutes, my time in captivity, that because the South Vietnamese had been fighting all their lives – you know, before the Americans, it was the French, Genghis Khan – so try to put myself in their positions saying they grew up in a war environment. That's all they've known, just like our children today grow up in a free society. Well, that's just their way of life over there. And so when I went back, I went to a military advisor team, and there was five of us on that team, and I was stationed in a place called Likhe, which is 75 miles north of Saigon. Of course today after the North Vietnamese took over in '75, it's now called Ho Chi Minh city, but for those who have served, it will always be Saigon. And so I was there as a military advisor, just kind of rare echelon position and so forth with a small detachment of South Vietnamese soldiers and so forth, and then about two weeks prior to my scheduled discharge -

When was the date of that?

Ken Wallingford: That would've been, let's see, I was supposed to have been discharged April of, let me back up James, that would've been what, April of '72, yeah, because I was caught six days before my discharge, so that was April of 1972. And so I was sent out to the Ford base called Locninh, and joined the rest of the regiment which was four other Americans. We had a lieutenant colonel who was commander of that, a major, a captain, and an E7. Excuse me, four others, so I was the fifth one to join them. And so we were at this Ford fire base that had an airstrip there that Bill Macklumor's group built five years earlier when he was with Special Forces, and Bill tells well at least Ken, we built it to last. I said no you didn't because we lost it. Well, we didn't have that problem. I said Macklumor, you didn't build it strong enough. But it's ironic that he was there at the same place where I was captured, you know, five years earlier. And so went up there and I guess I'd been there for several days and we'd actually three of us gone into Saigon, again about 75 miles to the south of us, the day before just for our kind of a one night R&R deal, went to a very nice French restaurant. You know, Saigon even during the war was a very beautiful city, but you drive down the streets and it's ___ wired, people with guns, so we go in this nice French restaurant, they're in tuxedos, they got the napkin overlet, and you walk in with your field gear and all this stuff and you're having a very nice dinner. And so the next day we went back and we went as we were driving up the road from Saigon into Locninh, we stopped at the little village there, and the French man that I had mentioned a little while ago, that one of the guys on our team knew said come on up and photograph the war, not knowing what was gonna happen. And so we were sitting there in this little village at about dusk, and this little village, there was three compounds here – one where we were, the South Vietnamese were in the middle one, and then there was two American advisors in there, and at

the end in the north end it was a French man's plantation home because the whole thing was surrounded by plantation trees except for when they built this airstrip there years earlier. And when we set there about dusk and see the French man flying out on his plane, we thought that's kind of strange but not giving a second thought to it. So we went back to our compound and about 6 o'clock that next morning I had just gotten up, gone to the latrine, saw the colonel out in his hammock. So I went back and just a few minutes later I heard these little thumping sounds coming in on our compound, mortar rounds, which intensified artillery rounds later on, and it took us probably, and we were with about 200 South Vietnamese soldiers, and probably about three hours later, we kind of intercepted enough radio transmission to figure out that we had been hit or were being attacked by three divisions of North Vietnamese soldiers and each division has 10,000. So you got five Americans, 200 South Vietnamese, and 30,000 NVA and Viet Cong soldiers. So we called in the Air Force for air support. They provided support 24/7 for about two and a half days just trying to keep the guys off of us. And then so needless to say we went without because myself and the XO were in a different position than the command bunker which had the colonel, the major and the senior Arvin commanders. But on the second day of the three-day battle, the camp commander who was a lieutenant colonel O5 and the artillery commander walked out and surrendered to the enemy, she hoid. You know, one of the problems and I tried to rationalize that they'd known nothing but war, OK, but they quit on us. I mean they, one of the problems is there was no leadership in the South Vietnamese Army ranks, generally speaking. And so they surrendered, those two guys. So we said OK, this is our war now.

They turned over all 200 of their men?

Ken Wallingford: No, they just surrendered themselves because what did not happen, they would not get out and direct their folks to defend the perimeter. They were all hunkered down scared out of their wits. Now of course we were kind of outnumbered and outgunned, but still there was just no leadership. And so when we took charge, we were already kind of running the thing anyhow, but we officially kind of took charge of that day and then on the third morning – now we'd gone without food, sleep, or water. I was monitoring the radio in our position from the headquarters and so forth, so you knew kind of what was going on, and so on the third day of that battle driving Russian tanks, they literally over, came through the perimeter, and overran the camp. Now I had lost communication with the command post at that point, so I told the major because he was an artillery guy and I'm an infantry guy, and I said Ed, you just stay here. And so I went out just to kind of, I wanted to get a feel for what was going on. So what the game plan is gonna be or what are we gonna do next. And I can remember walking out clear to this day and seeing all these NVA soldiers hanging off these Russian tanks as they were coming through the compound, and they were on foot. They looked like a bunch of ants. They were all dressed in black. They were just everywhere. So I said Ed, come on, let's go. My game plan was to go find a secure position and hide and try and escape and evade ENE that night. Well I thought I found a secure position between two buildings. We put a wall of sandbags in front of us to kind of conceal our location, and no sooner had I got that last sandbag in place, a big explosion went off. And the next thing I felt like half my head had been blown away. I felt hot, burning shrapnel on different parts of my body, and I literally saw my whole life flash before me. And you say what's it like? And the only thing I can equate it to because it was weird, it was like an old motion picture film. I would see different things in my childhood and growing up and just, you know, there's no continuity, just bits and pieces and stuff, and that's the closest I can imagine come to death and survive it. And the other guy that was with me, the major, I think he had a sunken chest wound and so forth, and he looked at me, and Ken he told me, you look like you're gonna die. That's what I felt like I was gonna die, Ed. And so we went back into our position, didn't have any more communication with the command bunker, and so I got on the

radio and told them I said you sit there in that chair and you guard the door, and you see shadows, anything coming, you shoot, don't ask. And I got on the radio and I can remember telling the commander of the air strikes, I said you put everything you got all over us. Get these guys out of here. Because the last thing I wanted to have happen was to be taken prisoner or whatever. So the military did a phenomenal job. I mean doing what we asked them to do, keeping 'em, naping 'em, in the end there was just more of them than there was of us. And one of the things we did not want to because the, and in fact he lives in San Antonio now, Joe Honsworth who is the CNG commanding general for the three corps, was in charge. He was up near every day. In fact he got a DSC at battle after us because he literally got on the ground and tried to defend that city for the next 30 days. That's a separate story. So anyway we didn't want any helicopters land and rescue because it was just too hot an area. And so we didn't want to take that risk. So we went into this other secure place, had a door on it, we had a couple of Arvin rangers, and rangers they wear different uniforms and so they're usually identified as being kind of the best of the best if you will, and so we got on the radio that night and the battery started going dead and it was night fall and so forth. We basically didn't have any more communication with the air support. And the next morning they came back in because they knew there were still guys in there because they had captured our Vietnamese jeep driver, and of course he told them how many and so forth. So they just systematically went through the compound and we were in an underground bunker with only little portholes that you could look out, and we smelled gasoline and so we knew what was gonna happen next, and so before we decided to just go ahead and exit through those little portholes and stuff, the rangers started stripping down out of their uniforms, and so when myself and Carlson exited, I mean the Viet Cong and the NVA was right there with guns pointed at us, and they took, there was three or four if I remember correctly of the Arvin rangers around the side and shot 'em. But I can remember again to this day walking out, no food, sleep or water, totally spent, later on I had 17 shrapnel holes from the bridge of my nose down my legs and so on, but because of all the fighting we could hear it had moved to the south because in 1972, their goal was to go to Saigon like they did in 1968, the ten offensive. Now when they finished with us, they went to a place called Anloc, and that's where the Commanding General Hosworth got on the ground because we spent the U.S. and the South Vietnamese Army spent 30 days defending that little village because if they had not, they would've been in Saigon, and of course three years later they ended up doing it. But they committed to stopping them there. But I can remember walking out and as they're coming up and taking stuff off me and this and that, there was, it was like a low, cloud overhang, and it's almost, James, I felt at peace. Now I just, it's just one of those feelings that is hard to describe. I hadn't any sleep, water, I was wounded, I didn't know what was gonna happen to me, and I just felt God's presence because when I went to Vietnam, I was agnostic. If you believe in God, that's great, but don't come preaching to me. But there's no atheists in foxholes or battlefield conversions, I am one, because on the second day of the battle when we determined it was gonna take a miracle to get out of there alive because there was nothing physically I could do or anybody else on that team to get us out, we just started praying. God, you get me out of here and if I've got to live or stay a prisoner or whatever, I'll come back and make a confession of faith. So I can remember walking out there and I don't know how long we were there before they took us out, and I just felt at peace. And so they took myself and Carlson out into the rubber tree plantations around us and so forth, and I don't know how long we were there. They gave me some water. They gave me what I call a rice that looked like it had kind of a glucose look to it, some sardines which I never had a sardine, never ate a sardine, don't like sardines, and they were kind of over there and they're kind of looking at the pictures like are we in those pictures, which I don't think, was probably from an earlier group that was stationed there, and so they said get up and start walking, and they made us stop at one bunker. In fact it's this picture here there's a big bob crater that's in front of us and so they made us stop and pose with our heads down and our

hands tied up, and said, and the caption read look, we've caught the American imperialist, as they called us. Here they are, blah-blah-blah-blah, and when we stopped there, I mean I don't know how many, but it seemed like a bunch, a lot of the NVA and Viet Cong just kind of popped up behind trees with cameras, just started taking pictures. And so probably for the next 10 hours, we walked, we didn't know where we were going. We knew we were gonna go out of Vietnam, and about halfway along that walk, the guy that was with me and Carlson had to help me because I just couldn't walk any further. And so night fell and we hooked up. Had met at another location and one of the other two guys in the command bunker, one of the other three guys in the command bunker was there, Mark Smith. Now the colonel had died, the sergeant E7, we don't know what happened, didn't know at that time but he was later killed. So out of five of us, three of us survived. And so then they put us in the back of one of our jeeps and tied us up with comma wire, communication wire, and the Viet Cong was driving this jeep and we'd drive for a while and this was at dark, and right after we'd start we saw a specter gunship off in the distance, and I didn't speak Vietnamese. Now the guy, Mark Smith, this was his fifth tour and he spoke Vietnamese fluently, and he tried to convince this guy to turn off the jeep because the specter gunship could pick up heat waves off the ground, and that jeep gives off a lot of heat. Now fortunately he was way off in the distance, but we never could convince this guy to shut this thing down. So we stopped for a few minutes and watched that thing and so forth, and finally it just kind of drifted in a different direction, and then we'd move on and then the jeep would stop. The Viet Cong guy in the passenger side, the jeep would just stop, and this guy would get out and run off into the bushes. Maybe he was going to relieve himself. Come back, truck on, a little while later, we'd stop. Gets out, goes around. We figured out there's phones, field phones along the way, and what he's doing is saying hey, we're coming, probably with Americans or whatever, don't shoot. And so over the next couple of days I lost track of time because we'd do this at night. They always wanted to move us at night because they went to a lot of trouble, now this was in '72, Nixon has taken out 150,000 troops a month, and so they went to a lot of trouble to capture us, and so we'd sleep during the day and then when the road stopped, we'd get out and get on the Ho Chi Minh trail, and then we'd pick up another vehicle later on and then a couple of days later, we were in a vehicle and we could tell we were actually entering into Cambodia because of the little road sign, and so they took us into Cambodia. We stopped at another camp for about three days. This was kind of a little camp for evaluation of our physical condition I guess and so forth and so on, and then we left there but we left the French photographer there, and he was later released I think after about three to four months. They told him because he's a French man, blah-blah-blah-blah, they're not gonna keep him too much past that. So he stayed behind and we moved forward, and then the next couple of days it was move at night, sleep at day, because they didn't want us coming in contact with the local villagers even though you're in Cambodia. Now we never did make it to North Vietnam. So we got in this one place going through this little village and our little camp, we didn't know what it was, and then we spent the night there and as light came, they had hammocks for us, and here we are, we don't know where we are in Cambodia. We have kind of a general idea, and we see this bamboo fence over there probably about 25-30 yards away from us, and we could see the tops of heads of people and said that's got to be American POW's. And so about a day or two outside, then they moved us inside. Well, let me back up and say because of my wounds, they offered me penicillin, and I had had a negative experience as a child. I was paralyzed for a couple of days from penicillin, and I heard the story if you're allergic to it, you don't want to take it, it could be fatal. And so I said God, you brought me here this far, I'm just gonna trust you. And so day after that I think it was then they took us in this camp inside this fence line. And here was five tiger cages in a circle. Now they had already moved the Americans out to another location, so three of us walk in, there's five tiger, 5 x 6 in a circle and there's a little guard standing in the middle. So they put me down at one end in a cage by myself and then put the other two guys together. And probably and there

was a guard in the center of the camp, probably 16-17-18 years old, had a K-47, guarded 24/7, three shifts, 8-hour shifts, and I can remember one morning because they always said OK, you're gonna have to speak Vietnamese to the guard. I mean there's one guy who's in charge of this spoke English fairly well. And so we said when you want to go in or outside your cage, you're supposed to ask the guard in Vietnamese. They called them liberation fighters because they're liberating their country, their folks and stuff, and so I can remember laying on the floor in this cage because there's a dirt floor and it was really, it was a history lesson because you sit there and you're sitting inside this 5 x 6 tiger cage. The cage itself is made out of bamboo trees that they've gone out and cut down, put 'em into the ground, assembled them with no nails or hinges, they bored little holes out and put plugs in 'em to assemble 'em, and the roofs as we found out later, we helped replace a couple of roofs, were made out of leaves. I said people can't live like this, in this day. Now this is back in the 70s, OK? But people can't live like this. Yes they do. And so I'm laying there and I see something moving on the outside of the cage. This was a black cobra snake. I said uh-oh, this doesn't look good. I'm always trying to put a positive spin on a negative situation. So I slowly turn my head and I do what you're trained not to do, move. I should've just stayed there. So I get outside the cage, don't even ask the guard for permission because I am scared out of my pants, and I said, I'm trying to convince to him because he doesn't speak English, you know, snake, whatever, well the snake has moved on. This snake came up like he was ready to do one of these song and dances on me, and I said oh gosh, where are we. So over the next 10+ months there was crate snakes, green bamboo vipers called the two step, it bites you and you're dead in 2 seconds, no questions asked. I was more afraid of dying from a snake bite than whether I was gonna survive or B-52's had several times during that 10 months bombed in the area where we were located. So they would lock us up during the day. I called that CS. I called my cage a house. And then later on they brought in a hammock. I've still got the hammock today and some stuff. The hammock was my bed. They brought us mosquito nets, you string up and you have to drape it over because of malaria. You catch malaria over there, you want to die. If you've ever been sick with the flu or whatever, it's worse than that. And so forth, and got malaria, and probably in that 10 months I lost over 40 pounds. But they did feed us three times a day, but it was very limited. The guy, he would come in in the morning, they come around, unlock the cage, and this time I had a 10-foot chain locked around one of my ankles. The other thing was locked to the cage itself. It never came off unless I was either to go to the bathroom or to bathe which was every two weeks. 10 days or two weeks on bathing. And as we looked around, now you're not supposed to communicate with the other people. Initially it was just the three of us, two guys in the other camp, because the guy come running over with his cape and you can understand sign language pretty easily if they're pointing a whip and you don't do what they think you're doing that you are doing, and I said OK, if we ever tried to escape, now Nixon taking out all these troops, OK, let's give it about a year and a half. Because inside the fence line all the way around is three yards of pungy stakes. I mean they are just right next to each other so we couldn't have gone out that way. And I later met a guy in Washington when we went up there. Nixon had us up there for a little deal. That was actually James Sexton was his name, was actually in that camp, and he managed to escape. I said how did you get off that chain? Well when they capture me, he was wearing a retainer, and every night he would on one of those links and finally broke the link and got out. Now there was two entrances or exits to the camp, however you want to classify 'em, so he got out at night. The Ho Chi Minh trail is kind of like a spider web. It turns. It's not like a straight line and criss-cross and this and that, and it's about 6-8 inches wide. The rest of it's all triple canopy jungle which means you can't see from here to the wall. So he got out and about an hour later, he ended up coming in on the other side of the camp because he thought he was going the right way back to South Vietnam, back to friendlies. So that convinced us that escape wouldn't have been successful, more than likely. And so they would come around in the mornings and lock the

cages and then the guy would bring a little bowl. We had little metal bowls and I got that, fish with rice, a couple of pieces of pork fat about 1/16th of an inch of meat on it, size of a quarter, so light the air they bowled it, and then whatever vegetable is in season. And periodically I said hey, this ain't enough. You got anymore? Oh no, no, they accused us of bombing their supply routes. But we could see over the fence line them carrying big old bowls of food and this and that to their own people. And at night because they had families with them, we could hear little babies crying at night. And I said you guys were born in the jungles, you're gonna die in the jungles. And so primitive conditions you can't imagine. And so no can do, no can do. And then fill up a little bowl of water three times a day. If you ran out, sing halloy until the next time. And so being an only child, it was somewhat easy for me to "entertain" myself, just thinking about the past, and this great and wonderful country we have, things you just take for granted until it's taken away from you. And then periodically they would bring us some propaganda material, and I spent a year on tour of duty over there, so some of the, one of the little booklets, little pamphlets I read had a couple of battle summary reports that I was at, and so one day the guy comes in that was in charge of us. Says come with me, takes his lock off. So just follow me. So we go outside the camp and go out into this little open area and here's this little bamboo made table and a little chair behind it, and here's this little tree stump about 6 inches off the ground and I'm looking at him like I know I'm not supposed to sit in the chair, so where do you want me to sit? You sit on that stump. I said this is gonna be good. I got ten wounds in my legs. And see initially they would come in and change the wounds daily. They believe in letting the wounds heal from the inside out, where in the Western world, you stitch it up. Well the worst wound I had was on the inside of one of my feet, and it took about two months for all my wounds to heal. I had already declined penicillin. So I just started praying. I said God, heal me, blah-blah-blah-blah. And so it took about two months for them to heal because I was afraid of infection. You know, medical care is not even medical care as we know it, and so when he takes me out, so here's the stump, I said OK. This is gonna take me a few minutes to get down. So I get down on this stump, and just a couple of minutes later, here comes this guy and he sits down at the chair. I got this thing figured out. Because generally we were a little bit taller than Asian folks, and so when he sits down, I'm having to look up at him and he's got the superior position. Just little mental games. And so we go through this little meet and greet deal and stuff, and spoke English fluently, and he said OK, name, rank, serial number, all this kind of stuff. This is where the code of conduct they need to throw out the window. I think they've improved it a little bit, but there was guys up in North Vietnam that basically said too much that people like Colonel Butday, Air Force 06 Medal of Honor recipients sued, some of these guys, and one of them committed suicide, a guy name Cavinaw, so the government backed off all that stuff. But anyway, so you try and skirt the issue. I used to do a class out here at Bergstrom on escaping, evasion, code of conduct and stuff like that. To the best of your ability you always want to resist. I mean if nothing else, make up something that sounds plausible. And so he tries to play the sympathy card. Well, we're sorry you're here, blah-blah-blah-blah. Maybe words with you and you can go home, so forth and so on. I said OK, hopefully sooner than later. And so then we get down to the material that they had given me. What did you think of it? I said well, I kind of have to disagree on a couple of these guys, a couple of these things. I was there. You guys didn't win. And he looks at me, eyeball to eyeball, in all seriousness, oh no, you have been misled by the propaganda machine we've got in this country called the free press. And that's when Communism, the true meaning of Communism sits in. I said really. OK. You believe what you want, but I was there. Because they believe whether it's true or false, but if you tell someone, repeat it 1,001 times, it becomes true, irregardless of the validity of it. I said OK, this is how it works. And so we did this for about an hour, hour and a half. Then they took me back in, put the chain around me and so forth, and then I had one or two other sessions. They brought in a couple of times a piece of paper which was roughly like a 5 x 7, and had five lines on it so

you can write home. Well, there's not a whole lot of space here for me to write on, but I knew it was never gonna leave that camp. I mean UPS doesn't deliver to Cambodia, I'm sorry. Now the guys up north got stuff. Evan Alvarez, the first pilot shot down 8-1/2 years got a Dear John letter from his wife, and some cookies and stuff that they had already gone through and smashed up before they gave them to him. So the guys up north because they were in traditional prison facilities, got stuff, or people like Jane Fonda, Ramsey Clark, and some of these other people went up for biz and so forth, you know, got to see them and interact with them and stuff like that. But the longest held guy out of three camps, 27 of us total, was 5 years in Cambodia. Now the longest held was 9 years, Floyd Thompson, Special Forces, captured in South Vietnam, over a period of time taken by foot to North Vietnam, spent 5 years in solitary confinement. And it's hard to comprehend. Now he has since passed away, but I mean it's a lot of growing experiences. I mean to one go fight the enemy, then live with them, and try and understand their philosophy, their way of life, their position and stuff, and then you have a chance, you know, as I've told school kids and other groups sometimes, say does America have problems? Sure we do. But compared to other parts of the world, this ain't nothin'. You need to be thankful and appreciative for every single thing we've got. You got a chance if you don't like your elected officials, you can vote 'em out of office in four years. You can get in your car and drive anywhere you want. You go home and now you've got an air conditioned home, TV, whatever. So don't say that America is going down the tubes or this and that. It's still the best country on the face of the earth.

Let me ask you sir, when you were captured, what did your parents, what did your family know back home? Did they know anything about where you were?

Ken Wallingford: Initially they didn't know for a week. And the U.S. government intercepted a radio transmission that had my name on it, and so they knew I was alive, and then my mother was kind of quiet, not really, very aggressive, and she would go to Washington for these meetings. My dad's retired military and they're divorced. My dad wasn't as active as my mother was. I don't know if that's an only child or whatever. But she knew, they knew exactly where we were in Cambodia because as I mentioned earlier, B-52's would periodically bomb around us. One time they got a little close which is OK, but in triple canopy jungle, you hear that shrapnel flying through and we had to get in this underground hole or cage just so we wouldn't get hit. So about a week later, she knew I was alive. And then she went about trying to get me out. Now I didn't come home immediately, but I was on the first plane coming out because, we can jump around or whatever, but let's go mainly if you want to keep it in sequence. I don't know if you're gonna go back and -

It's your interview -

Ken Wallingford: Let's go back, so they fed us three times a day. Every time the guy came in, there was a little table out front and little stumps a little bit taller than the first one I had to sit on during interrogation. And so I was in solitary for six months before they put another guy with me. And then they would feed us three times, so every time the guy came to our "cage," we had to stand up, bow, greet 'em in Vietnamese. And then about every 10 or 14 days, they would take us down to the stream to bathe, sometimes individually, sometimes in pairs. Now when they got us to this camp, they took our uniforms from us. I had about \$40 because I was captured six days before my discharge. So I kept trying to say look, I'm supposed to be a free man, guys, you can let me go. Oh, no can do. So they gave us black pajamas and some plastic sandals and stuff like that to wear, but they would take us down to the stream where we'd have to get water out of the stream and put it in this little trough, and from that bathe and wash our clothes, because we

had a second set of clothes that we had washed previously. And of course they would sit across over there with their guns watching us and all this kind of stuff. And then sometimes they would give us menial tasks to do like I mentioned before, because the monsoon season was over, the leaf shingles don't last very long so they go out and collect all these leaves, cut down these bamboo trees, and even breaking them down further to almost toothpick size of those toothpicks, and so we learned how to put shingles on the roof and stuff like that. They brought in corn on the cob and we'd have to shuck that, shell peanuts a couple of times, we'd walk around the camp or some of us did to kind of sweep the little pathway from the branches they gave you ____.

Said I can do this when I get home. If I don't have a broom, I just go --. But other than that, it was just kind of like well what do you think about, what do you do and this and that? Well, you have a lot of time to think obviously. What are you gonna do when you get home? What did you do that you'd change from the past? And stuff like that, and then as they captured other guys, they would bring them into our camp, and one of them was the first and only Air Force guy that was held in Cambodia. We just buried him in Arlington in May. Dave Baker was kind of a gourmet cook. They'd lock us up at night, OK, when are we gonna hit? And we're not supposed to talk between the cages, but we'd find ways, and there would be animals walk through the camp and this and that, so we'd pretend like we were talking to the animals. They thought we were crazy. We were trying to communicate with the people next door. What's for dinner? He'd go in this long dissertation about we were gonna have this and this and this and this. OK, that's enough. I just ate, I'm hungry still, but you know, and then they brought two more Army guys in and they brought the only Marine that was held in Cambodia. 17 Marines were released in '73. Jim Walsh. And I can remember when they brought him at night. I said well OK, we got a new guy. It's dark, nobody knows. And the next day when they unlock his cage, this guy comes out, epitome of a Marine, James, and he comes down and he's got his flight suit on and everything, and the Air Force guy because he was shot down and shot through the legs, so his calf was about the size of a football. And what are you? He said I'm a Marine. I said what were you flying? He said like an '84. And the Air guy said how did you get in that thing because it's a very small cockpit. Oh, very tightly. Just kind of humorous and so forth, just to kind of keep the mental state fresh and relaxed and stuff like that. So at the end there were seven of us that came out of that camp and what they did was 30 days prior to release, because October or November, I can't remember which month it was, every afternoon, after siesta I called. They'd lock us up until 2 o'clock, 3 o'clock in the afternoon. Then they'd come around and unlock the cages and then this guy walked in with a little transistor radio, standing there looking at "The voice of Vietnam," straight from Hanoi, non-biased of course. And they were talking about how they were annihilating all the South Vietnamese, they're doing some damage to the Americans, and after a while, I'm thinking to myself, if you guys are killing all us good guys, this war ought to be over with. And again, distortion, fabrication and stuff like that. And they had an interview with Jane Fonda that they played over and over and over again for 30 days, and we won't get into that or my personal feelings about her, but people like Ramsey Clark who was Lyndon Johnson's, I mean Jane Fonda was up there for probably a week, and of course it was all orchestrated. Go where she want for the photo ops and the FO's one behind the gun turret and so forth, and I can remember hearing her, her closing statement was "I go to bed crying every night thinking of the damage we've done to these poor, innocent people." And I said you Communist witch. You stupid, I mean how can our country allow someone, I don't care who it is, to go into the enemy's camp and make anti-America statements? She never once left Hanoi to come to Cambodia, to go to any other camps, and some of the Americans that were held up there that refused to meet with her were beaten. Ramsey Clark, Lyndon Johnson's AG went up there. In fact when I came home, I went over to the Johnson Library because Mrs. Johnson was kind enough to let me stay in the presidential suite at Brook Army Medical, and we were talking, very gracious lady, very nice, so forth and so on. I mentioned Randy, and she said we're disappointed

in him, too, Ken. I mean what can you do? And maybe that's one of the strengths about our country. You can go to the enemy's camp and do the kind of things these people did. And Jane Fonda even though she has "apologized," she really hasn't apologized, and to this day, you can forgive but you don't forget. I don't care if you're young, naïve, whatever, you just don't do that. But they did and they will at future engagements. But anyway, then so about October-November, on the radio they said well peace is at hand. I said when did this happen? Well they were meeting in Paris, France, all the participating parties, and then we heard they couldn't agree on the shape of the table or something to that effect. So OK, we go back to business as usual. And now Thanksgiving and Christmas, they know, number one and I told especially the code of conduct says military people said don't ever, ever underestimate the enemy knowing more about you than you know about yourself or who you're with. Because when I tried to give them these general answers, well he'd start breaking it down – this company? This blah-blah? I said no, I didn't – why is that? I'm thinking to myself good grief, and at the end of that first interview, I said where did you learn to speak English so well? Off BBC radio in Saigon as a kid. I said to myself, I'm impressed, I'm impressed. And so Thanksgiving, they come in, two, three of them carrying all this food and all this other stuff we hadn't seen before, and then they take the chains off of us and let us go over to this one cage and we sit down at this little bamboo table, and they say we know what holidays are very important to you, and you not being with your family, and blah-blah-blah, so we wanted to – so we pigged out. Then they came back and did the same thing at Christmas time, like they were trying to show their sensitive side and stuff like that. And so Paris agreement was signed January 27th, but about, and part of that agreement was we were supposed to be out of Cambodia within 60 days. 30 days prior to our release which was February 12th of '73, they moved us to a brand new camp. Now to build a camp as I kind of described briefly earlier, is a lot of work. And I said why are we moving? They said well, the old camp, the well ran dry. I said ah, but anyway that's your story, you're gonna stick to it. So they moved us to another camp, a smaller camp, but because the Paris peace agreement had just been signed right before that or right after that, they didn't put us in chains, they let us kind of go from cage to cage and it was kind of come and go type deal, freedom and stuff. Of course we stayed in our cages at night and so forth, and then two days prior to release they just told us to pack up our stuff. And the Air Force guy because he couldn't walk, we literally carried him out of the jungles in a hammock on a pole. That's why we went to Washington in May to bury him. The five of us who survived symbolically walked behind the casket down to the grave site, because we carried him out, we're gonna carry him to his burial and stuff. But anyway, so we're carrying him out, and I don't know, it's probably seemed like for hours. And then we meet up with a douce and a half truck, 2-1/2 ton Army truck. This kind of looks familiar. Where'd you guys pick this up? And so we all get in there and then we drive back in to actually where I was captured right outside there, and we spent two nights, and that's where we meet up with two other camps that were in Cambodia that we didn't know existed. Now the Marine, when he was being brought up to us, went through an abandoned camp. So I said well they've got more here than we know. And so we met these other guys, 27 of us total, and I can remember sitting around the campfire the night before, and this guy that was in charge of us still, and he says well, we hope, you know we're glad you're going home, we hope you won't think too harshly of us. Wait til I get out of here, you know. But I mean he was trying to be nice, and again, his position and so forth. They tried to what I call fatten us up before release because during the war, they had the largest clipping service of anybody. They were very sensitive to what other countries thought about the war, about their treatment of people because word got out in '69 somehow of the harsh treatment, and that's when the guys that were there prior to '69, the treatment stopped that we've all heard about and so forth. And so the morning of February the 12th, we walked out, got on this truck, all 27 of us, and went out to the air strip by where I was captured and they had taken all the tin of the roofs and buildings and so forth. It was like a ghost town. So we're

sitting there, this is like 8 o'clock in the morning, and probably about 30 minutes later, we hear these helicopter sounds come from the south mountain ridge, and here comes in single formation five helicopters. That was the prettiest sight we'd seen in over 10 months. And they pull in in formation, in line there, and they land on the other side and so forth, and they shut down, and we don't move. So probably a few minutes later, the trucks start up. By now it's probably about 30 minutes, maybe an hour, and we turn around and go back where they had been holding us for the last two days. Well come to find out, some of the North Vietnamese prisoners that were being held by the South Vietnamese didn't want to go back. So all of a sudden there's a little stand-off here, eight hours worth for them to work it all out. I don't know what the final resolution was. But then they put us back in the trucks later that afternoon, and took us back out there. Now the helicopters weren't supposed to have any displays of machine guns or any of that stuff. Well the guy that was in charge of the pick-up team told us we weren't gonna leave without you guys. We were ready. So anyway, we get off the truck, the Army guys go over there, the Air Force guys here, and the Marine guys over here, and then we go through this little checking in and this and that and so forth, and then we get on the helicopters and this is almost like Dark 30 on February the 12th, and fly into Saigon. It's probably about a 45-minute chopper ride. And so we land at Tan Son Nhut Air Force Base, which is a big Air Force base there in Saigon. And we land there and see these lights on, I see all these people out there, I see this red carpet, here's the medical plane that's gonna take us to Clark, here's all these people, and I hit this one guy and said George, who are all these people? There was an ambassador and all this kind of stuff. I mean we didn't know. We sat around the night before and said how are we going home? Are we just gonna get a commercial airline ticket in Saigon? We had no idea. And so they opened the door and we go down the red carpet, shaking hands with everyone to get on the plane, door shuts, we're out of there, we fly to Clark Air Force Base. The same day they released an initial group out of North Vietnam at Hanoi, because our release supposedly, our release was held up for 8 hours, we were held in Cambodia, everyone else even though they may have been captured in the South but taken up over the years into North Vietnam. They say there was more people there at our landing than there was when the first group came out. I mean we got off and there was a picture of me and I'm pointing saying look at all these people with homemade signs, I mean this is just crazy. And we get on a bus and we go to the hospital and I remember looking out the window and I forget how long a ride it is, several miles, and here's this guy jogging alongside the bus, just crazy. And you get to the hospital and we did the medical, and this is some time anymore I can't remember, and middle of the night, and those of us went through the medical deal and we were OK. They turned us loose on the kitchen. You can go in there and order whatever you want and stuff like that. Then they opened up the PX the next night. The next night we can go in the PX at night and buy stuff, and got on the telephone and called home and stuff, and then two days after I landed I was on the first plane coming home and I was one of the first two Texans to come to Texas, and so I got home Valentine's Day of '73, flew into Kelly Air Force Base, took a chopper over to Fort Sam Houston, landed there probably about 2:00 in the morning, escort folks out there and so forth. I'm just following and they're leading because I don't know where I am, what I'm doing, or what the drill is and stuff. They take us over to the hospital again on the helivater, and the door opens and there's my parents. And even though, well you know, I hadn't seen 'em in a year and a half, two years. I mean they didn't tell me. Just the door opens and there they are. So you know, obviously there was quite a homecoming and from Mrs. Johnson to let us stay there in her suite, you know, Johnson suite was on the other side, I see the Lady Bird suite. The people that took care of us, the medical doctor was Johnson's military doctor. So we had a chance to share stories with us, ___ to take care of the President and Mrs. Johnson, which come to see the whole kitchen, see all that kind of stuff on top of the hospital and stuff like that. And then I was there I think 10 days before they let me out on R&R to come home to Austin. My dad was living it up on the city at that time ____, so came

back to Austin and I was here and then go back periodically. I had a relapse of malaria, so I had to be hospitalized again. Malaria never leaves you because I can't even give blood because of that and stuff like that. But just the homecoming, I mean you know, we went to the White House, Nixon let us go anywhere in the White House, largest sit down dinner on the south lawn. There were so many of us. Plus all the John Wayne's, all these movie stars. There at my table I can't remember his name because he didn't stay secretary too long, got to sit next to me was the new secretary of the Army. At that time, this was '73, he's talking about those volunteer Army's gonna work, and I thought no it's not. Less than a year and he was gone. I mean obviously volunteer Army works, the military works wonderful today. Now it wouldn't have worked that early in the game, but today it's working magnificently because of the change in '75 with the end of the draft and stuff like that. But we just, you know, it's been a blessing. I mean it's just been unbelievable, the support we had those first few years, and this and that, and I said look. I didn't do anything different than you or you would have done. I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. But really because when I came back and had a chance to go to church and I walked down the aisle of the church where my mother's a member, Hyde Park Baptist, and made a profession of faith, it's like it's all worth it. But I would never wish it on anybody to have to go through, and I can't imagine what it's like for some of those guys that were there 2, 5, 9 years? But you learn a lot of lessons and probably the most significant thing is it's up here. You can do anything in life if you've got the mental toughness and attitude. That's 90% of it in my case, because I knew when I was captured, when I was welcomed, you know, I was gonna walk 10 hours. I said some day I'm going home. I don't know when, I don't know how, but some day I'm gonna see the U.S. again. And all the stuff and everything that you went without, it's just, I call it a new lease on life. So every day is a great day. I don't care if it's 110 degrees outside or 30 below. It's a great day. Because I came so close that it wouldn't by God's intervention, I would have been a name in Washington on the wall because I should've been dead.

That's an amazing story, sir. I really appreciate you taking the time to let us record it and save it, and I guess I just had a couple of questions from what you were talking about. One was about the Arvin rangers. Why do you think it was that they were executed when they were captured and you weren't?

Ken Wallingford: Well, because the North Vietnamese Viet Cong detested them beyond comprehension, so I think personally it was just we're not gonna ask any questions, we're not gonna hold you, we're just gonna shoot you. And as we see today with what's going on around the world, even as far, south as the border here, some people have no respect for life and they'd just as soon shoot you as look at you, and I think it was that, that you are the enemy, you are the worst enemy that we can encounter outside of the Americans. You're expendable.

And then when you guys were released, why do you think there were some of the Arvin that didn't want to go back?

Ken Wallingford: I think because they felt like and I never did experience the confinements that they had, but they had to better than maybe life in North Vietnam, or wherever they were from. It could have been Laos or Cambodia, probably North Vietnam. And my summation is that even if they were incarcerated, they were probably being fed well. We always, all you got to do is go look at the local prisons around here. We take better care of the criminals than the homeless. Now what kind of double standard is that? And I venture to say that we took better care of their prisoners than the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong took care of the American prisoners.

Or maybe even took care of their own.

Ken Wallingford: Oh yeah.

And then when they finally came to pick you guys up, being released, was there a roster that had your name on it? Did they have a pretty good understanding of who was supposed to be released at that point?

Ken Wallingford: I don't know all the particulars, but they knew exactly who they were supposed to pick up and they went through that. In fact there's a picture, yeah, those little white tags. So they tagged us with that information and stuff, and I know that Henry Kissinger, when he met with Le Duc Tho, the North Vietnamese negotiator, Kissinger basically took the list that the North Vietnamese gave him. He didn't say where's a Ron Dagg, the most photographed POW in the world. Kissinger took the list they gave him and left. Shame on him. But I've got to give credit to Nixon because Nixon authorized the bombing of North Vietnam Hai Phong harbor December of 1972 that ended the war. It's unfortunate that he left office as he did, but that's what happened. But I mean Kissinger just went there and took the list and left and said see you.

So you're pretty well convinced then that not all the POWs were properly accounted for.

Ken Wallingford: James, if you go back and look at history, they always hold back a certain number of people for whatever reason. Bobby Garwood, Marine, "deserter," was there 17 years. Now I don't know Bobby, I wasn't with Bobby. Bobby was picked up, I think he and another guy in a jeep or something driving down the highway. Now I'm not saying they're not true because they were there and Garwood was in their camp. Garwood they claimed was a deserter, a traitor. But there's always two sides to the story. Anyway Garwood, when we came home, Garwood stayed until '77 or '79, 17 years before he was able to get out and it was his second attempt because after a while I say well why would they hold Americans? Well, let me back up and say two things. One, they released who they wanted to. The people that would look good because they had the biggest clipping service. They knew the world was going to be watching 'em, and say here are your POWs, look how good they are. We are humane and lenient people. You came to our country, you invaded our country, you bombed as Jane Fonda said, you killed, you massacred, on and on. And so after, so two people did not walk with those airplanes. Two guys didn't walk off those airplanes, the Air Force guy in my camp, and until his passing recently, in fact he came back, retired as a one star general, flew 25 missions in Desert Storm. But we carried Dave Baker off the plane. The other guy came out of North Vietnam. I don't know what happened to him. But so why did they keep people? Well, 300 some were Air Force. 100 some were Navy pilots, 79 of us were Army, 17 Marines. So they keep some people for intelligence purposes, at least initially, because I can tell you stories about a guy named Colonel Sullivan whose wife lives here. When he left the base, they knew what position and formation he was gonna be flying. His was the only plane out of that formation that was shot down. How did they know that? They just know. And then people like Garwood. You know, after we left, well where's Garwood gonna run to? And he can work on vehicles, so they'd send him over here to go work on a vehicle or something like that, and he tried to get out one time I think through some Swedish citizens or something, gave him a name, Bobby Garwood, didn't go anywhere. Second attempt later on he got out. And so forth. So they hold people for bargaining, manual labor, because it is a liability in a sense you've got to feed them and this and that, but historically they always hold back people. So again, 593 of us came home in '73. Only two didn't walk off those flights. We did a good job, we're human people.

Going back to the fire base where you were captured, you had mentioned that the South Vietnamese, the 200 some South Vietnamese were hunkered down, just what happened with that? Were they simply just overwhelmed by the numbers or apart from the lack of leadership, was it just cowardice? Was it poor training? Was it no will to fight? Was it all of the above?

Ken Wallingford: I think probably, Mark, it's probably all of the above starting with leadership, because I've said for a long time, the South Vietnamese army military had no leadership in its officer ranks. That's just my observation after two and a half years over there and in our particular situation. So I think one it starts with the leadership. I think they were probably scared to death because the odds were heavily against us. Some of them could have been cowards. But I think it's all those you had mentioned, I think it's just a combination. I think it always, too, it starts with leadership. If your leadership is not out there directing you to do what you do, then you need to deal with that individual. So if the leadership is not giving you any leadership and they observe that their leaders walk out, what are we doing here? Why are we fighting? Why do we want to fight? Those guys checked out. So they were basically hunkered down in different places. A lot of them were in the command bunker with the senior staff and stuff like that, and I just think, and I can remember when I was out there briefly trying to ascertain what was going on and figure out what the game plan was gonna be, these Russian tanks and everything, I mean they just turn the turret and just blew a couple of them away. They were running away and so forth.

With that fire base though, what were the defenses like, because you have an air strip here in the middle of this plantation? Were the defenses adequate? I mean obviously with that size of an incurring force, there's not a whole lot you're gonna be able to do, but do you feel it was adequately protected or what was the strategic importance of that?

Ken Wallingford: I don't think it was adequately protected. I mean yeah, they cut out this big old air strip, and had these three little compounds as I called them, right there next to the air strip, and but as far as, like this is an aerial view of what it looks like from the French man. But I think and I'm second guessing, we knew something was gonna happen. We didn't know when. Because they had already started, every spring they called what their spring offensive, and they had already started up in North Vietnam and another part of the country in a place called Qua Tri during the Easter offensive, and so they were just systematically coming down the road. We knew. We didn't know when or how big, so was it a tactical error on the Americans' part for not providing more support? Not to say if you had put in a couple of companies that you could've of infantry, or brought in some artillery. You can't move 'em that fast. It would've made a difference. I don't think anything could've saved us with the amount and strength of their force. I mean one of those three divisions was an artillery division. You're dealing with 30,000 bad guys. I mean we were fortunate we held it for two and a half days. I mean bombing. I mean you can only do so much and they just said hey, let's go for it, and over they came.

And so they were, it was really a force on its way to somewhere else. This was not a primary objective.

Ken Wallingford: We were just in the way because their goal was to get into Saigon again like they did fours earlier in the '68 offensive.

So they were just rolling through and just -

Ken Wallingford: We just happened to be in the way, two and a half days, and then went to a place south of us called An Loc, which is where General Honsworth earned his DSC, and the U.S. and the South Vietnamese sergeant says we have got to defend An Loc at all costs, otherwise they'll be in Saigon, and that was a 30-day battle to repel them.

You mentioned earlier on about the French man that owned that plantation and how he had flown out. I mean obviously I guess you think he must have been tipped off by somebody they are coming. Had you guys had any contact with him before he left?

Ken Wallingford: No, because we got back in there that night before, but I can assure you when he did go back, he didn't have anything to go back to. We leveled that sucker. Because when they started early that morning about a little after 6:00 a.m. that morning with little mortar rounds that intensified, we figured out that they were using his two-story plantation home as a spotter location, and so when we figured that out, we said guys, take that son of a gun out. And sure, they had to tip him off. That's why he got out of town that late. Where he went when he went back, I don't know.

Now there was a period between when you probably knew that it was kind of a hopeless situation and when you decided to escape and evade there. What was sort of the thought process there? I mean because any average person is probably gonna go well the first impulse is you see 30,000 guys coming over a hill, you're gonna run the other way. Explain that to me a little bit.

Ken Wallingford: Well they had encircled us, so there was no "back door exit" path that we could take, so being surrounded, there was no on the ground escape route. The plan was, now we didn't know, I mean after the first day kind of went on, I said we don't know how long this thing's gonna go on, much less if it's gonna go more than a day, two days, we're gonna die, we just didn't know. We were just kind of living for the moment. And then when myself and Carlson went in our position, and then heard or lost communicate with the command post and that morning, the morning on that third day, literally heard them and those tanks coming through, then we had to "react." I think at that point prior to that, we were just trying to keep out of the fire base and stuff like that and hopefully repel them because we were throwing some heavy stuff at 'em from the air, but I mean you can only do that for so long and you got rubber trees that stuff kind of bounces off of. It's not like open air and we could take 'em out and stuff. So they were in ___ fighting and stuff like that from the borders and stuff, so it was more a reactionary at least on my part. OK, so we lost communication, didn't know what was going on. I don't like to be in the dark, so I don't want to stay in that bunker, underground bunker where we were, saying OK, we're gonna watch the door, we're gonna see – I wanted to go out and see what is going on, because even though I was only a sergeant, I "pulled rank" on the major because he was an artillery guy. A nice guy, but he'd never done this stuff, so I said you stay here, let me go find out what's going on. Then I came back and got him, said let's go. So at that point it was more reactionary and that's why I said let's hide and wait until night falls and then try and escape. That was kind of the game plan. And I've told people, too, I said even all the training, they probably do a much better job today on escape and evasion, or if you're confronted by the enemy, and course of reaction. Now it's phenomenal what they're doing today for the folks, but back then it was kind of like sometimes you reacted. OK, this is not in plate book 101. I mean you always defend your position, you call in support whether it be ground or air, whatever, get extracted if possible and get out of Dodge. But sometimes that's not always the luxury that you have. So it was more of a reactionary thing. Well OK, this plan didn't work. Let's go to Plan B.

And when the explosion went off, you were injured, that was just something that had hit nearby and it was just one of many explosions during the battle, so I guess I'm just trying to understand then you said it went off and then you were stunned I guess.

Ken Wallingford: To this day, I don't know what the explosion was from. It could've been from one of the tanks. It could've been from our own aircraft because when we abandoned our position to go hide, we had no radio, so at that point the military was pretty much running the show from upstairs and they knew and saw these guys, so they were just trying to take as many of them out. So it could've been from our own, it could've been from one of the Russian tanks. But yeah, there was bombing almost from the very beginning of the battle with the mortar rounds and then calling air strikes and this and that. We had ordered B-52's and I think they were about an hour away because they had to come out of the Philippines I believe. If we had ordered, and this is all supposition, if we had maybe ordered them earlier or they had gotten there earlier, the turnout may have been completely different because they can clear out a jungle in a heartbeat, but that didn't happen. And so being reactionary and not wanting any aircraft to land because we don't want to risk any more life than was possible, and like I said, with the one guy on our team, we didn't know what happened. He kind of cut loose and left the captain, because the colonel had died already in the battle, and supposedly to this day we don't know for exact, but I think he was killed trying to escape on his own and leave everybody else behind. So some people, I mean I saw people that the first encounter I had when I was over there that had been there for months react differently than I thought a "seasoned" combat soldier would. But everyone reacts differently. Mine was just kind of a reactionary thing and the best of my ability.

Considering everything that followed, everything you went through, it sounds to me, and tell me if I'm wrong, but you see that moment, that explosion as pivotal. And you say that you should've died, for any other difference you would've been on the wall, but was it that moment or was it in everything that was to follow that was pivotal?

Ken Wallingford: Probably if I had to pick out one thing, Mark, I would say that's probably it. And not to say I've seen more or less than some guys up to that point, and sometimes it's like I'll tell people, I've been there, done that, got the t-shirt, so you can't one up me. Not to say I'm better than you are, but I've been there and stuff. But I look at even though I've been in Vietnam for a year, never been moded, you know, unfortunately I had to take out some people, and then you get there, OK, you're six days before discharge, and you're kind of on easy street. You're just watching the clock, and then all of a sudden you're in the battle of your life, and you realize I may not make it, and then when you're hit and you feel hot, burning metal penetrating different parts of your body, and then you see your whole life flash before you and in retrospect you say I came so close to dying that from that point forward it's kind of why I just said I'm gonna survive, I'm gonna walk 10 hours, I'm gonna, we didn't know if we were gonna have to stay a year, two years or whatever. I just knew that someday I was coming home. It's just that feeling. It's a gut feeling on whatever.

Was that in part because you had survived that wound, you had survived getting that hit, did that give you some even though you were weakened because of the wound, that gave you some strength?

Ken Wallingford: I said I'm gonna make it.

Tell us a little bit about the photo again so we have it on tape. Your arm is bandaged up.

Ken Wallingford: That is I've got a couple of shrapnel wounds in this arm, so they gave me a little, I don't even remember them giving it to me, a sling, so they had just captured us probably about within 15 or 20 minutes I'm guessing, so they walked us out of our fire base into these rubber trees and stuff, and over here is one of many bomb craters from all the bombing. So as you can see in the picture here, there's a couple of guards and it's a posed picture. They said OK, stop, put your heads down, and so the guy is on the other side of the bomb crater shooting this picture. Look, we caught the bad guys. Here they are with the evidence, bomb crater, this and that, they're all banged up.

But the look on Carlson –

Ken Wallingford: That's Carlson.

The look on his face is not one of defeat at all. It's more like I'm gonna have to frankly put up with this.

Ken Wallingford: Well he's an old artillery guy, you know? I remember one time when the B-52's were, and see I was the only enlisted man in our camp, and one thing about Vietnam versus previous military war campaigns, they always segregated or separated the enlisted from the officers. I was the only enlisted in that camp. They thought I was an officer because I acted like one. But anyway, Carlson, I remember one time when the B-52's got a little close and there was always this hole in the ground in our cage when he and I were rooming together if you will, we never knew what was down there. It could be snakes, or whatever, we didn't want to go down there. Well, when the shrapnel starts flying pretty close, you jump in there. Well Carlson was so weak, I said Ed, I don't want to have any more shit out of you, or I'm gonna leave you in this hole. OK, OK, get me out of here. So I pulled him out, but I think because see, his wife was waiting for him in Bangkok for R&R, and I can remember one or two nights after we'd actually been in prison camp, he was in a different cage across the way and I heard him balling because he was supposed to be in Bangkok and didn't know if his wife knew what had happened to us and stuff like that. But it's kind of like yeah, but that's just kind of Carlson and the French guy, I mean if you see a picture of him, well, you could go on the web site, Nick Damon, I think he's listed in there, and when he went back about 9 years ago or 10 years ago, I said oo-oo, this guy's put on some weight, didn't look quite the same. And yeah, Carlson, he just, and he'd only had a sunken chest wound, so he wasn't that banged up.

What's the first thing you think of when you look at that picture?

Ken Wallingford: When I first saw it, I said man, I knew I was good looking. I didn't know how banged up, I knew how banged up I was but I'd never seen a print of it until DOD sends me a copy of the picture, and so forth, but when I saw it I said I know exactly where this was taken and when it was taken and all that stuff. It was kind of like this is the only picture that I have of my captivity, either capture or captivity. Then of course you've got the one of our release and stuff, and it's just kind of a subtle reminder of where I've been and where I am today and stuff. People say well, do you have night, well, you know, I think about it all the time. It's just one of those things that I think any traumatic event that happens to you in your life, I mean, and I asked, one time I was speaking at the church and we said well, World War II POW there, and I was talking to everybody, I says, this was like years ago, I said this is PkeySD, these thoughts and nightmares, do they ever ___ this, Ken? They will stay with you the rest of your life. And that's OK because I say, I think it's kind of God's way of saying remember where you've been and how far you've come, and again, of course last time I was in Washington a lot because my

daughter worked up there, but you think about the wall or your hear stories just like this Texan that was just killed in Iraq. Look, I should've been dead. I am so thankful.

When you were in captivity, did you have nightmares then?

Ken Wallingford: It wasn't so much nightmares, Mark, it was I didn't have trouble sleeping because you know, it's kind of like well what do you do during the day? Well, if you're not reading propaganda stuff, you're not putting leaves on a roof, you're not shucking corn, whatever, and you take a siesta for two hours every day, and so forth, but the times, I didn't have any nightmares and I think being an only child helped me because I was used to being by myself, so it wasn't like someone who maybe came from a family, one who have other siblings or don't, or yeah, I thought about mom and dad, but I knew they were strong people, that they would survive and stuff, but I didn't have any of that stuff at that time. I mean you think about OK, here we are, God chose caught six days before my discharge, what if, what if – well you can what if all you want. It doesn't change your circumstances right now, and so you have to make the best of your current circumstances because you can't change the past. And then you say OK, how long am I gonna stay here? And surprisingly, even though I was there 10 months, the shortest guy was probably there, one of the B-52 guys, so that would've been 30-60 days, to Floyd Thompson once held 9 years. But time passed rather quickly what surprised me. Now if I'd have been there a few more years, would it have passed? I don't know. I mean I look back today, here it is 2009, it's been 37 years, and it seems so distant, so long, it's in another lifetime, but again, it's something that I deal with every day.

How did you keep track of time? At one point did you realize this is gonna be a lot longer deal than a short stint? And then how did you keep track of that time?

Ken Wallingford: Yeah. I guess one, I figured out when I couldn't convince them that they could let me out, I was supposed to be a civilian, since they caught me six days before discharge, and then I guess just a matter of time, you know, when you listen to the transistor radio, I didn't think I would, we'd be released earlier even though we'd heard a few stories and then of course when we got back. They released some guys throughout the war, like a James Sexton, who escaped, and then you say why did they release this person and not this person? I guess maybe just as a show to the world that they're humane people, we're gonna release this guy. Maybe he is a sympathizer for our cause. Maybe he'll go back and say hey, they're not such bad people, kind of that anti-war movement and all that stuff. But passing time went quickly, and then I forgot who taught me this, I could tell you how many days are in a month. It's the old knuckle treatment. You know, 31 days on the top, 30 days in between, until you get to July, of course you know February is 28 unless it's leap year. So I was the unofficial keeper of the calendar and I always knew OK, it's Monday, it's Wednesday, whatever, and stuff like that, but it just seemed to pass. Each day you get up, OK, you're not doing anything, you're sitting on the stump, you're watching for the snakes, you're hungry because you just ate and when are you gonna get your next bath, are you gonna do interrogation stuff? I mean it just all seemed –

Did you get into a routine? Did you have a routine that you depended on?

Ken Wallingford: Well, we knew we were gonna get three meals a day. That was a given. Morning, lunch, and dinner, and after dinner they would lock us up at night and stuff, and one time for no reason, they call, they play games with you. It's just like in interrogation the guys says oh no, you've been misled by the propaganda machine. OK. One day we're sitting there one afternoon and a couple of the guys walk in with these man-made barbells. Hey look, these

guys are industrious. I mean made out of wood, a stick and a couple of triangular like blocks. That's OK, we can punch some wood, good exercise. About two days later, they come and take them out. Well, camp commander didn't want ya'll exercising. And then one day early on, we said could we have a little religious service? You guys can be present. Nothing, you know, plotting against you guys, just – they're either Buddhist or Catholic, so we can't lose. And so the guy goes out and comes back, camp commander doesn't believe in God, says no you can't. OK. But just little things that you start to put the pieces together, and a lot of it is psychological. It's like even when I was over there fighting against those people, you think you've zeroed in on 'em, you've got 'em figured out, and almost intuitively they change directions on you, no rhyme or reason. It's kind of like wow, how did that happen, how did they know, how do they do that? It's just you can never figure 'em out and I guess it's the way it's supposed to be no matter who you're fighting.

Did they discourage any talk about America or American values or patriotism?

Ken Wallingford: No, they really didn't.

Patriotic displays you remember?

Ken Wallingford: Well, we couldn't display anything. We didn't have anything to display, but one of the guards would go over to the cage where Mark Smith was, the guy that was part of our tour spoke Vietnamese fluently, and they would ask him, it's at night and nobody else is around, their superiors or anybody like that, they'd say what's it like in America? Do you have automobiles? Do you have cars? Tell me about it, what it's like. And you hear these stories and you think oh my gosh, these guys are never gonna leave. They had no concept of what's beyond their borders, anywhere in the world because they're sheltered, they're protected. They're given what they can read, what they can hear and all this other stuff, and it's kind of sad that even to this day there are still some countries like that, and you say my gosh. And another thing, I didn't smoke, but the guys that did smoke, I think they got three smokes a day, so they brought in little pieces of paper, a little tobacco, and they have to roll their own little cigarettes, and those smokers, I think there was probably four out of seven, anyway, they'd smoke 'em all the way to where their fingers turned yellow after a while. I said I'm glad I'm not a smoker because if you were a chain smoker, three wouldn't have made it.

You said that the treatment of prisoners had improved I guess substantially by the time you were there. Were there beatings? Did you witness that? Or had they sort of realized that that was going to be bad press?

Ken Wallingford: I think it was gonna be bad press, but again, they would do other things to kind of mess with your mind.

More mental than physical?

Ken Wallingford: More mental, I mean like one time they came down to me and they said come with us. Now down at the far end, you know, the camp's not that big, anyway, down at the other end, well, there was another grand bunker with a little cage gate on top of it. They put me in that thing for no rhyme or reason. Now fortunately there was a little hammock in there, so I was generally, because you know, I don't know what's in the bottom of this thing, is it snake infested? What's going on down here? And so they took me and put me in this hammock, locked the gate, had little slits and everything, and I stayed there for like two, three days. And

then they let me out and put me back down there. And it's just a mental thing. So yeah, the beatings stopped basically in '69, so I was captured in '72, but they would just kind of mess with you mentally and stuff. One guy, George ____, this is a sad case, this guy here, originally from Connecticut, he was a captain, got the distinguished service cross, he and another guy were at the northern compound, and he was a captain, thank God he had it because he was in a little different attachment, it was a major, because the major left him during the battle and escaped on his own. Well, George evaded them for 30 days before they caught him, and I think they were mad because they couldn't find him for 30 days. And when they finally got George, brought him in, you know, they gave us fairly early a hammock and mosquito net. And they didn't give George any of that stuff for like weeks, and he was as skinny as you see in the picture, he's not much heavier even today when I saw him in May, but I can remember one day I was supposed to kind of sweep the leaves around from the cages and stuff and I was down there sweeping around his cage and he was just lying on the ground, and see they gave us brand new uniforms before we left, so we looked good. But he was just laying on the ground. I said George, you OK? Yeah, I'm all right. So they just deal with it in different ways, or they withhold food, or they don't give you enough and stuff like that, so you just have to adapt and it's like I think one can adapt to almost any situation in life if you're mentally tough. I mean nothing prepares you for this. No one goes into combat serving their country saying I'm going to be captured, or I'm going to get the medal of honor. Things just happen, and like I said, second tour of duty, six days before discharge my whole life changes. But again, it happened for a reason. I'm as convinced today as I've ever been because I became a Christian through that experience and I've just got a whole different outlook on life, a new lease on life which I'm very thankful for.

What was the first food you ordered when you came back?

Ken Wallingford: You wouldn't believe it. I came back to Fort Sam Houston.

Could you even eat?

Ken Wallingford: Yeah, I could because when we got into Clark that night, went through physicals, went through some initial debriefing and so forth. Then those soldiers that were medically "fit" could go down to the cafeteria. What do you want? Eggs? Lobster? I said give me a good steak. So that was the first thing I ate there.

You got a steak.

Ken Wallingford: Gotta. Now I got to Fort Sam Houston because I had heard about, and I never had one, Big Mac's, and the first couple of times they let off at Fort Sam, I went to the nearby McDonald's and I would eat three Big Mac's, two fries and a strawberry shake. And I could remember and when I ate up there in the hospital because again, Mrs. Johnson's suite, they had a little kitchen back there, and they came in to me one day and says Ken, we're gonna have to cut back on the cholesterol, the butter that you're putting on your potatoes. You're messing up the blood results. We can't read the blood tests. Because you just want, want, want, and unless they had you on a restricted diet. So eventually I graduated from Big Mac's and stuff.

Then you said you got to make a phone call.

Ken Wallingford: Phone call was later that night after I had gone through the medical debriefing and so forth. Said you can go down the hall and use the pay phones and stuff, and the first person I called was my mother, and that was pretty neat.

Was she expecting that call? She knew you were back?

Ken Wallingford: I think she was. I think and I've asked. Mother's always been kind of quiet, what she did up in Washington and this and that, she threatened to go over there and all this stuff, but I'm sure she had to be briefed. Yeah, she was, she was told that I was gonna be released and may have watched it on TV or each family member, spouse, whatever the situation was, I was not married at the time, had a military lady's _____. My mother still lives here in Austin, kind of row, and so I think she was probably expecting my call because when the phone rang a couple of times or whatever, I can't remember that part of it, she answered the phone, blah-blah-blah, and one of the first things she asked me, how's the wound on your leg, on your thigh? I said how did you know about that? Well, you kind of pick up stuff, intelligence community and stuff. And supposedly some guys had gotten, I've never seen the pictures, I've never confronted this, but supposedly it could've been people on the inside or whatever, but supposedly some people got close enough to the camp to take some pictures. I don't know. Just like Ross Perot supposedly was trying to get some people, his people into Laos because Laos had this big cave that could hold 150 people. And I've talked to Perot over a number of years and stuff, and I asked him when I got back because I went to visit with him. He says Ken, I heard those stories. It's got electricity, running water and stuff, but, and I had a Laotian general working for me, and we never could find that thing. So you don't know. I mean but she knew about that, so I don't know how she knew, but it was a very emotional experience as you say, and then two days later, after I'd been cleared, got on the first plane out and we stopped in California. Well no, left Clark Air Force Base, stopped in Hawaii, and this was during the day time, probably late morning or something like that, and the red carpet and we get out and go into the building I guess while they refuel the plane, all the people out there at Hickham Air Force Base, and the guy holding the door is a one star general for me, and so I forget how many guys are on the plane and stuff like that. And so we go in there, and a little while later we leave, get on the plane -

All right, well sir, I really appreciate you taking the time to do this interview with us today. It's been an honor for me and I know everyone here at the Land Office appreciates your service to our nation, and usually what we always ask in these interviews is if there's anything you'd like to say to future generations that may hear this interview years from now.

Ken Wallingford: Thank you, James. I appreciate the opportunity to share my story, and I appreciate the Texas General Land Office doing this. As I've spoken over the years since I came home from Vietnam, I always try and stress, especially to school children, I say military service is an honor and a privilege to serve this great country of ours. Obviously this is 2009, the draft has been discontinued since 1975, so all of the men and women serving today and probably going forward will all be volunteers, and I don't think personally even though there's been talk in the past, especially with the current OIF, OEF operations gone of reinstating the draft, but I don't think that's gonna happen, at least in my lifetime. But I think anyone, men and women that volunteer to serve our country are to be respected, appreciated for their service because it's something that they don't have to do, but because of the love of the country that they are doing it today and will do it in the future, and when I joined the military, I knew eventually I was gonna go to Vietnam, and Vietnam was a controversial war, very divisive in this country as the history books talk about and so forth, but I felt it was my responsibility as someone that joined the military to serve my country wherever. And a lot of people said well, we don't support the deal on Vietnam or maybe we don't support the current engagements that our country is in and we used to call 'em conscientious objectors or draft dodgers and so forth, and my philosophy has

been whether you support what we're doing or not, it's your responsibility as an American citizen when the government calls for you to serve, and if you choose not to, don't let the door hit you on the way out, in other words, don't come back. It's that plain and simple. And these young men and women serving today and that will serve in the future are America's best and brightest, and they're to be commended for their service and so my time of military service is one that I look back frequently on. I'm proud of my service. There at the end it didn't quite turn out like I thought it was gonna be because as I mentioned earlier in the interview that I was captured six days before my discharge, and so I got kind of an extended tour of duty that was not required of me, but it was just the price of serving our country during a non-commissional time. And so considering the alternatives again as I probably should've been a name on that wall in Washington D.C. at the Vietnam Memorial, I'm just thankful that I survived and I thank God for blessing me and sparing my life and so forth, and kind of in closing, I'd like to share a poem that was written by one of the people in our camp, Captain Dave Baker. He was the lone Air Force officer in Cambodia. He has since passed away a few months ago. We buried him at Arlington Cemetery in Washington, D.C. And it kind of summarizes our feelings maybe better than I can articulate of a small camp of seven people and about Vietnam and so forth. So let me just share that with you and then we'll close:

In this camp there are seven men
All of whom Uncle Sam did send
To Vietnam to fight, he said
So others can decide how they want to be led.
Gladly we went, but alas for us
We were captured in battle
In the heat and dust
Taken away from our families
out of the war
Then chained to a cage
Life is really a bore.
We are Army, Air Force and Marine
And all of us are ready to scream
About the inhumane treatment and care
The Viet Cong call lenient and fair.
As prisoners of war
We eat pork fat and rice
But we think of steak
And other things nice
Our minds seem to dwell
In the future and past
Oh how long can this war last.
Someday we will all be set free
But only the good Lord knows
When that will be
The United States friends and wives
Surely be the happiest day of our lives
Until that great eventful day
We must all stick together and pray
And give thanks to God
For being alive
For surely it was He

Who let us survive.
We'll be a little older
But much more wise
And I don't mean from listening
To Communist lies.
If there's one thing upon which
Seven men can agree
That one thing is
Freedom is not free.

And really that last thing, and sometimes we hear that, freedom is not free, you pay a price, and it's especially meaningful to us because we lost our freedom for a certain period of time and so you have a chance to reflect on the things that we take for granted in this great country of ours. Even though we've got problems, you know, we'll have problems in the future, I don't know of any other country that can go through the embarrassing resignation of a president of the United States, as Richard Nixon was forced to do in the summer of 1973. But you know what? We kept going the next day, business as usual so to speak, so until you lose something that you really don't have a strong feeling or appreciation for, there are a lot of things we take for granted, but this experience that lives with me to this day and will live with me forever and again, thank you all for allowing me to share my story.

Yes sir, well thank you. It's an honor for all of us and that concludes our interview. Thanks.

[End of recording]