

## **Transcript: Lee Wilson**

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*Good morning. Today is Friday, December 2, 2011. My name is James Crabtree, and this morning I'll be interviewing Lieutenant Colonel Lee Wilson. This interview is being conducted by telephone. I'm at the General Land Office building in Austin, Texas, and Lieutenant Colonel Wilson is at his home in Killeen. This interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thank you very much for taking time out of your day to talk to us. It's always an honor for us. The first question I always like to start with is please tell us a little bit about your life and your childhood before you went into the service.*

**Lee Wilson:** I certainly will, James, and thank you very much for the opportunity. I was born here in Killeen, Texas, in 1936. At that time, this was a very small farming community of about a thousand, twelve hundred people. We didn't have any military connection at all at that time, of course. We had four cotton gins, and this was a cotton shipping center built by . . . This town was actually built by the Santa Fe Railroad for that purpose, for shipping cotton out of here. I graduated from high school here in 1954, and I went on to the University of Texas at Arlington the following year. I worked at a bank the first year as a bookkeeper at the First National Bank. And then I went on to school, the University of Texas at Arlington, today. It was called Arlington State College in those days. I had a very good first year. I was in the ROTC program up there, which is what I really did want to do. I had an opportunity there that I never had before, so I was trying to take advantage of it as best I could. I had an opportunity to go and play baseball professionally between semesters, and my head football coach at Killeen High School, Mr. Leo Beckley, called me and asked me if I would consider it since I had played for him in high school, and I told him that I certainly would. After starting the second semester at ASC, I signed with the Baltimore Orioles and dropped out of school, and went to spring training with the Orioles in Thomasville, Georgia. And spent maybe two months down there, and finally made the team after suffering through all those cuts that they had every night. Every night they'd come through at 12 o'clock and put the cuts on the board there of people who were being eliminated and sent back home. Anyway, I finally ended up making the ball club in Thompson, Georgia, and my assignment at that time, it was in Class D. The day that we broke camp there in Thomasville to go to our, Thompson, for our season to start, we were informed by our manager, Mr. Barney Lutz, that we would not be going there after all because the league, the Georgia-Florida League, had folded, and there was just no place for us to go. Along with the Georgia-Florida League, the Texas League, the Canadian League, and several other leagues of baseball had folded up and there just wasn't any place to go and play. So we reluctantly . . . My career was cut short because of that, so I didn't have a baseball career. I returned to Killeen and got ready to go back to school. I went to work as an electrician's helper here in town, just to have something to do. At that time, we were working on Fort Hood; Fort Hood, Texas, which had come in 1941 to the Killeen area. Anyway, I worked out there for a little over a year, really a year and a half, and met a young lady that, soon to be my wife and partner, companion, I guess you would have to say, for the next 53 years.

*That's great.*

**Lee Wilson:** We were married in August of 1958, and I went back to school at UTA, which was then still ASC, Arlington State College, and we finished in February of 1962. I went straight

through, didn't take any summer breaks, and we graduated in 1962, actually, in January. I was already assigned to the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division for my first assignment. We were commissioned, actually, at the same time we graduated, actually, before we graduated. So I reported to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, in February of 1962, as assignment to the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division. And I'm getting ahead of myself a little bit. My first assignment actually was to go to IOBC, Infantry Officer Basic Course. I was an infantry officer at Fort Benning, Georgia. Everybody goes there. So before I could go to my assignment in the 82<sup>nd</sup>, I had to go to Fort Benning for a few months of training as a young new officer. And while I was there, went through jump school also, so I could be fully qualified when I arrived at the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division at Fort Bragg.

*Let me ask you, sir, to go back a little bit. You were born and lived in Killeen before Fort Hood was even really created.*

**Lee Wilson:** That's right.

*Do you have some memories of that as a child, when Fort Hood was being built?*

**Lee Wilson:** Well, I do. It seems that all of the wood in the world arrived here in 1941 by train. I don't know where in the world it came from. It was just one trainload of lumber after another. It came in here and the little highway between Killeen and the first town west of us, a little town called Copperas Cove, well, the railroad was about 100 yards from the highway, and all along that highway between the railroad track was white tents. And these tents were the home for the workers that were building Fort Hood. They didn't have any other place to live. All of the people in Killeen at that time were farmers and young business people, or older business people, and they opened their homes to these people as best they could. Almost every little garage and chicken house that people had there had somebody living in it. They just built them up to conform to human living conditions and people could stay there. This was a very busy, busy place at that time because we were, as a nation, at war with Germany and Japan, and everybody was pitching in to do their part. The land that Fort Hood now occupies was purchased from the former owners and that was indeed a bitter pill to swallow for a whole lot of 'em because they were given 30 days to move off of their farms. They could not move their homes or their barns or take any of the fencing. Thirty days. Now, some of 'em had spent their lifetime living there and their mothers and fathers before them. And to have to move off in 30 days, they had no place to go and no job to go to. So it was a very, very sad situation. But in spite of that, a positive attitude was maintained by everyone. The government didn't pay some of those landowners for the whole year after they got their property turned over to the government. It was a disaster, so to speak, but it was a very calm disaster. I do remember that as a youngster. I started to school in 1944, I guess, as the war was winding down, in the first grade. In one school, we have a big brick school at the end of Avenue D. *(paused recording)*

**Lee Wilson:** *(resumed recording)* I was discussing the conditions here in Killeen, Texas, as World War II came about and some of the things that we had to go through at that time. Of course, everyone that went through that period of time knows about the rationing coupons that our mothers had to have and use daily. There were certain things they could buy, certain things they couldn't buy, and I still have some that my mom saved for me. She gave them to me.

*Do you think living around Fort Hood at that time influenced your desire to later go into the Army?*

**Lee Wilson:** There's no doubt about it. That's all I ever really wanted to do. As a child, a youngster rather, I played Army and I kinda got it in my blood, I guess. I wanted to go into the service. I wasn't real sure which branch of the service I wanted to go into, but I chose the Army because I knew it better than anything else. My father was drafted. First of all, he worked for the post office, and he was drafted in 1944 at the age of 35. And went into the Navy during World War II, and left my mother here with three children, my brother and sister and I. He worked at the post office before he left, so mom sat down in his chair at the post office as a postal employee, and she didn't know anything about how to do that, and had to learn. But that's just the way it was in those days. Rosie the Riveter was born in those days. Everybody knows about that. The women pitched in and took over men's jobs all over this nation. This little town here was no exception.

*Were you able to hear from your dad pretty regularly by letter and that sort of thing?*

**Lee Wilson:** Yes. He was injured in basic training. I guess his advanced age kept him from going overseas. He was stationed in San Diego, California, and went through his basic training there. Stayed there as a postal employee, not an employee, as a postal worker, when he got physically capable to do that. He was injured in the back, had a very serious back injury. It finally ended up killing him about 13 years later. A cerebral hemorrhage was connected to it somehow by the medical profession. But yes, we heard from him, oh, once or twice a month usually. My mother did have an opportunity to take the train out to California from Killeen here and visit with Dad for a week and then return, of course. So it wasn't like breaking up the family completely like a whole lot of families had to suffer through during that period of time.

*After high school, you went into the Navy first, is that right?*

**Lee Wilson:** My senior year in high school I joined the Naval Reserve in Austin, Texas, 60 miles south of us. And I served in the United States Naval Reserve for eight years. Actually, only one year in the Navy, then I transferred to the Army 'cause they started an Army Reserve unit here in Killeen.

*Okay. So you spent one year in the Navy Reserves?*

**Lee Wilson:** That's right. Long enough to go to basic training at Great Lakes Naval Training Center, and then I had to go to meetings in Austin every Thursday night.

*Was that at Camp Mabry?*

**Lee Wilson:** No. It was not. It was in a naval facility. You know I know exactly where it was but I cannot tell you the address to save my neck. It was in a naval building in Austin that had all the training aids set up for Grim Reaper training, other aspects of naval, sailors living on board ships and things like that. So it was not Camp Mabry.

*Interesting. What was it that got you to go to school at the University of Texas Arlington, or Arlington State?*

**Lee Wilson:** Okay. I went to work in the First National Bank, as I mentioned earlier, as a bookkeeper back in the vault. In those days, the procedures for working in the bank . . . Everybody that came into the bank had to go to work in the bookkeeping department and learn

everything they do there before you work yourself up to a teller or anywhere else. During that period of time, it was very well known in my family, as well as me, that none of us were going to be able to go to college because it just was a financial burden my parents couldn't afford.

*Sure.*

**Lee Wilson:** Therefore, it was incumbent upon me, if I wanted to go, to find a way. And then, my aunt, my father's younger sister, lived in Fort Worth with her husband and two children, and she told me that if I would come up and live with her, I could go to Arlington State College. I never had heard of Arlington State College before and I didn't even know what it was. So my mother and I took a trip up there and went out and stayed with my aunt there for a couple of days and went out to Arlington which at that time, there was a separate community of Arlington, Texas.

*That's right. It was a lot smaller then.*

**Lee Wilson:** And it was a couple of miles out there off the highway which is now I-20, but in those days, it was just a regular road. But anyway, I decided right there that that's where I wanted to go to school. It's the first college campus I was ever on so I didn't know what to compare it with. I just knew that in order to better myself and my social standing, so to speak, I needed to get an education if I possibly could.

*And when you enrolled there, did you still have in the back of your mind that you wanted to go into the Army?*

**Lee Wilson:** Yes, I did. While I was there, the day I arrived on campus, the first place I went was the ROTC Department and met Lieutenant Colonel Gough who was the professor of military science, PMS, there at ASC. And he explained to me how the program worked and what I would be when I graduated if I stayed with it and so forth and so on. And it sold me completely at that time, so I just fell in love, so to speak, with that place. I still go there occasionally to visit with the people in the military department.

*That's great.*

**Lee Wilson:** I was fortunate, very, very fortunate, to be selected this last year, in February, to be admitted to the Military Hall of Honor. Two or three former cadets are inducted every year.

*That's great.*

**Lee Wilson:** I did not know about that at all until I got the word that I had been selected for induction, so my family all joined me up there as well as old teammates and it was quite a ceremony. It lasted all day and into the night. I was number 85, I believe, of all of the people who have graduated from UTA. There's a bunch of 'em. There's only . . . There's very few in the Hall of Honor.

*That's a great honor, yes sir.*

**Lee Wilson:** Yes, it is. There are numerous general officers, including Tommy Franks, who was our chief in Iraq.

*Yeah. He's very well known. Very famous.*

**Lee Wilson:** Very well known. That's right. And so I was not only honored, I kind of followed a gentleman who is now a retired major general named Willard Latham. He was just a captain when I first met him as a student and a cadet in ROTC there. He was one of the ROTC instructors. He was the epitome of what I considered to be a soldier. He was immaculately dressed all the time and in perfect physical condition. Had a pleasant demeanor about him and could absolutely charm the buttons off your coat just about. He just set an example that I wanted to follow and I tried to follow him as best I could. He was at my ceremony, my induction ceremony, which I was thrilled to be. He had been inducted himself years before, so I had a very, very pleasant experience, so to speak, at that.

*So you graduated from there in 1962?*

**Lee Wilson:** In 1962, in January '62, I graduated . . . Was commissioned first and then graduated. Actually, the graduating class, there were only seven of us in the ROTC Department who were commissioned that day. The class graduated in June and I was already on active duty in the 82<sup>nd</sup> by then. So I did not get to walk across the stage and receive my diploma as a college graduate. It was mailed to me at Fort Bragg. So, I don't know what it is to graduate from college and go through the ceremony because I was already gone.

*Sure. So when you get to . . . You say you went to Fort Bragg first.*

**Lee Wilson:** To Fort Bragg and my wife and I were married when we went back to college so we had been married all three and a half years. When our first assignment at Fort Bragg, our first child was born there. Michael Lee. At Fort Bragg when it was the 82<sup>nd</sup>. He was born there in Womack Army Hospital on the post.

*I knew right where that is. My unit, when I was at Camp Lejeune, we would go to Fort Bragg for about a month, every six months, and spend that time out in the field, and do a bunch of firing missions, and Womack was the place, if any of our guys ever got any sort of injury or whatever, they would send them to Womack.*

**Lee Wilson:** Uh-huh. Well, I had an opportunity to revisit Fort Bragg occasionally because my service in Special Forces during the Vietnam War, we have a Special Forces reunion. Every fifth year, it's back at Fort Bragg. And of course, that's the home of Special Forces as well as the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division. I had an opportunity to go back there and things have really changed. Womack Army Hospital is not in the same building it was when we were there. It's all brand new, and the little apartment that we had on Square Drive, I don't know how in the world we ever managed to live in that little chicken coop, but it sure looked big to me, or to us then, whenever we first got there.

*Tell me, sir, how you ended up getting into Special Forces. Because I know that's not something that just every soldier goes into.*

**Lee Wilson:** Yeah. At that time, you know Special Forces wasn't a very popular place to be, in the early '60s. Nobody knew very much about it because, by design, it was that way. I just remember that some of the boys that we had in the 82<sup>nd</sup> that didn't make it very well in a rigid, dress right, dress ceremonial-type unit like the 82<sup>nd</sup> was . . . It was a hardnosed combat operation,

our unit, but we would send our . . . We called our . . . I don't think you could call them doves, it was just guys that weren't working out too well. They were transferred by request to Smoke Bomb Hill to go to Special Forces training. They turned out to be, by and large, most of 'em did anyway, topnotch NCOs in the Special Forces outfit. President Kennedy gave the Green Beret to the Special Forces in 1961, the year before I arrived there at the 82<sup>nd</sup>. I served two years, two and half years nearly, in the 82<sup>nd</sup>, and one day got a direct order from my troop commander. I was in Troop A, 17<sup>th</sup> Cav. He said, "Lee, Lieutenant Wilson, you need to report to the G1 up at headquarters, 82<sup>nd</sup>. They have some information for you up there for your next assignment." So I went there, to the G1, and he was a lieutenant colonel, and there were eight first lieutenants. Eight of us that were in the 82<sup>nd</sup> were told at that time that we were all going to Special Forces. Special Forces did not have enough people to do what they were being asked to do. This was 1964. All of us, just about in unison, said, "No, no, no, no, we don't want to go there." We didn't know very much about it, and we knew that it was not too popular at that time, so the G1 said, "Well, you're all going, and you've got a choice. You can select to go to either Okinawa, Panama, or Germany." Okinawa had the 3<sup>rd</sup>, I believe it was, the one in Panama the 7<sup>th</sup>, and the 10<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group was located in Bad Tölz, Germany. So I chose Germany, of all the three choices. Then I asked the question of the G1. I said, "Sir, when do we go to Smoke Bomb Hill to go to school?" His answer was, "All of you that are going to Okinawa and Panama will receive orders to report to Fort Bragg, to Smoke Bomb Hill, next week. The three of you that have chosen Germany will not go to school here at Fort Bragg. They have their own school in Bad Tölz, Germany. They will teach you what they want you to know." That's the way it was. We moved out of Fort Bragg and reported to Bad Tölz. My wife and our two-year-old son. It became a way of life for me. I enjoyed that assignment more than any, just about more than any I've ever had, because of the . . . Actually the physical portion of it was enticing. I was assigned to Detachment A-3 of A Company and it was a team that was oriented to the country of Czechoslovakia. My team leader, \_, was a native Czechoslovakian that had come across the border the hard way, under a hail of gunfire. And managed to get himself and a couple of his friends out of what had become Communist Czechoslovakia and into American control. Finally, they got enlisted into the United States Army and did a super job as an enlisted man until he went to OCS and was commissioned as an officer.

*That's great.*

**Lee Wilson:** And he was a tremendous leader, good for us because of our orientation to Czechoslovakia. Obviously, he came from there and spoke the language. That's the only language he could speak very well. Broken English was his second, and he taught us a language training every day, and it was a great assignment. We had ski training in the winter months every day. Mountain training almost every day because we lived right there in Lenggries, is where our . . . Lenggries, Germany, is about nine kilometers south of Bad Tölz. That's where all the teams are located there. The billeting area and the headquarters were up in Bad Tölz, in Flint Kaserne. It was the kaserne that was formerly an SS officers' training facility. Beautifully constructed, very strong granite buildings, as you would expect from the Germans. And anyway, it was just a tremendous assignment and I just walked around in awe of the surroundings that I was now in as well as the older Special Forces guys that'd teach me just about anything, and they did.

*How long, sir, did you end up spending there?*

**Lee Wilson:** I was two and half years at Lenggries with the 10<sup>th</sup>. In Bad Tölz with the 10<sup>th</sup>. And then I volunteered to go to Vietnam in 1966. And that request was honored quickly. But the buildup of troops in Vietnam was just underway.

*Yeah, that was very early on.*

**Lee Wilson:** Uh-huh. A lot of us volunteered to go. I know I got 60 days leave to get my family . . . By this time we had a daughter. Our daughter was born there, so we had two children. The Army gave me 60 days leave to return to the United States, bag and baggage, of course, and get a place for them to stay while I was deployed to Vietnam.

*How long was your tour in Vietnam scheduled for?*

**Lee Wilson:** One year.

*One year.*

**Lee Wilson:** At that time, I was a young captain. I made captain while I was in the 10<sup>th</sup> in Germany, and I actually got back to the States and had 30 days of the 60 days, and I received a phone call from Captain Henry Gold. He had been a good friend of mine in the 10<sup>th</sup> Group there and he was now the adjutant of the 5<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group in Nha Trang, South Vietnam. He called me and said, "Lee, you need to get over here as quickly as you can. Your leave is being cut short. We've had some situations arise here that . . . We just need you, partner." And he said, "Get over here as quick as you can. Orders will follow this phone call for your transportation." And sure enough, they did. I left out of San Antonio then, on board a troop carrier. Not troop carrier, supply plane. A resupply plane, a propeller job, flew us to Seattle. And we changed aircraft there to a bigger troop carrier. A 707, I guess it was at that time. Then flew into Hawaii for a few hours rest stop, and refueled, and went on into Cam Rahn Bay. Cam Rahn Bay is north of Saigon, in between in Nha Trang and . . . It was being built up as a major facility at that time by our engineers and several civilian construction companies called RMK-BRJ, I think it was. They were all over South Vietnam building things and just happened to be Cam Rahn Bay was one of their masterpieces.

*How did your wife feel, sir, about your leave getting cut short like that?*

**Lee Wilson:** Well, fortunately for me, my wife was a former Army brat. Her father was a retired lieutenant colonel, so she knew how to handle it better than I did. She had two babies to take care of and we bought a new home here, a little home here in Killeen for her to live with the two children and she knew the situation better than I did, and handled it marvelously every time. I went back three times over my short career in there, and three years in Vietnam, and each time we lived in a different place but she handled it like a pro. Typical Army wife that knows the situation. You have to keep them informed of everything that you're doing that you can talk about.

*Sure, well, that's always the joke is that the spouse is the commander-in-chief of the house.*

**Lee Wilson:** Apparently. You are not kidding there. And justifiably so. She's the one that has to bear the burden of all that at home.

*So when you arrived in Cam Ranh Bay and this was in 1966. I guess in the United States a lot of people maybe weren't paying attention at that time to Vietnam or it wasn't as controversial at that point as it was to become later. What were your first thoughts or your impressions when you got to Vietnam?*

**Lee Wilson:** You know, I got ahead of myself a little bit. I actually landed in Saigon the first time I was in Vietnam. The 5<sup>th</sup> Group had a detachment in Saigon whose mission was to receive all new incoming officers, enlisted men, all new assignments, and process their paperwork and get them up to Nha Trang as soon as possible. I was in Saigon three days. When they picked me up at the airport, the seat in the back of the Jeep was turned around backwards so your feet were hanging out the back, and I asked the driver, "What in the world?" He said, "If we get under fire here between here and Nha Trang, I mean here and downtown Saigon, you'll find out very quickly why that seat's turned around backwards because you can't get out of this Jeep in the back seat very easy. But you can with it turned around backwards and your feet hanging out the back."

*Makes sense.*

**Lee Wilson:** So that was my first impression of Saigon, Vietnam actually. I was in a place where you could . . . Somebody didn't like who you were or why you were there, and they might do just about anything and often did. My first assignment was routine in that nothing happened to us while we were processing through that detachment there in Saigon, and we boarded an aircraft three days later and were flown to Nha Trang for assignment. And that's where I met Henry Gold again, the captain who had called me, and I went into the group commander's office, his anteroom outside where the adjutant was stationed, and Henry and I were talking about what was going to happen, and he said, "I think you'll find that you'll have a very nice assignment here, and the boss is an old Irishman. He's a good man and I think you're gonna really like it." So, his name was Francis J. Kelly, the commander of the 5<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group. He's a full colonel. We never did have anybody, any ranking officer higher than a full colonel that commanded the group in Vietnam, and it's really a shame because that colonel, the group commander, had direct command over some 35,000 soldiers scattered all over Vietnam called the CIDG group. It was indigenous soldiers primarily with . . . I don't know how many Americans we had in country at that time. It wasn't that many but as they began to grow in numbers, his command expanded and expanded and expanded. By the time he turned over his command to his follower, Colonel Aaron, he had a lot of people, and more than anybody, more than any general officer that was in direct command of troops at that time. And his command stretched from Phu Quoc Island in the south, that's as far south as you can go, all the way to the Khe Sanh in the north. Of course, the Marines were at Khe Sanh and the Special Forces were in A camps that were out on the border and in various other places. Unfortunately, there appeared to be a lot of, I call it jealousy. I don't know what else to say about it because a lot of the conventional commanders of that time did not understand what Special Forces did or how they did it, and why they was there. Why did they look like downtrodden soldiers all the time, not all the time but most of the time, when they're out there working with the indigenous population? And some of them grew beards at a time before it was outlawed. It isn't today. They grow beards and they live right with the people that they're trying to support in Afghanistan and Iraq and places like that. They have to fit in.

*Sure.*

**Lee Wilson:** It was a new concept and it got off to sort of a bitter start in Vietnam because most of the officer corps at least had been trained in conventional warfare. We're gonna fight another war like we had in Europe or Japan, and that was not the case. We didn't have front lines in Vietnam. We just had a whole bunch of circles, circle up the wagon train, the wagons again so to speak. You were there so you understand what I'm trying to say here . . .

*Well, I was in Iraq. I wasn't in Vietnam but kind of the same concept though, sir. There wasn't . . . The enemy could be anywhere and you don't have the front lines or the conventional land war like in Europe or even Asia in World War II.*

**Lee Wilson:** That's right. And the standard procedures for Special Forces was not followed in Vietnam, and it was because they had to adapt. Normally, a Special Forces outfit would be deployed behind the lines in deep enemy territory where they would meet a guerilla force so to speak, and organize that force into a fighting unit, supply them with whatever's necessary for them to . . . I'm talking about uniforms and equipment, weapons and ammunition and food and everything, supplied to them as best we can. Well, we couldn't do that in Vietnam behind the lines, so to speak. But we did do that in the circles, in the small A camps that were scattered all along the border as well as within the country of South Vietnam. So it was an adaptation of standard procedure which was followed in World War II but just wasn't adaptable to Vietnam.

*Sir, I think you told me before we did this interview that you did four combat jumps in Vietnam, is that right?*

**Lee Wilson:** Well, yes. The unit that I was with . . . I got ahead of myself a little bit. Henry Gold, Captain Henry Gold, and the adjutant of 5<sup>th</sup> Group, introduced me to Colonel Francis J. Kelly, and I went in for an assignment there with him, and he talked to me a long time about what Vietnam was doing, what they were doing in Vietnam and where I would be going, and so forth. He literally said, "Willie, we're going to assign you to our reserve unit over here, the MIKE Force. And I didn't know what that was and I sure as heck didn't want to be in a reserve unit so I left there reluctantly not knowing exactly what I was getting into but as I started out of his office, he said, "Oh, by the way, there will be some VC in your unit. You never know who they are." The Viet Cong I'm talking about.

*Sure.*

**Lee Wilson:** And he said, "You'll never know who they are because they're sleepers. But I just want you to know that you do have enemy forces within your troops over there, and you need to surround yourself with somebody that you trust, somebody that you can depend upon to take care of you should this occasion arise." Well, as it turned out, I was being assigned to Detachment A-503, and that was an A team that was tasked with the responsibility of organizing a battalion-size unit. At that time they only had two rifle companies, and they were both Montagnard. Previously to them, to my arrival there in country, Detachment A-503 had been staffed with Chinese mountains, two rifle companies of Chinese soldiers. Now, a Nung is a Vietnamese citizen of Chinese ancestry. I think that's the way that's explained. And they are very, very good soldiers, and they are very loyal to the dollar bill, not necessarily to the individuals. They are mercenaries, and just prior to my arrival there, the 503 had been engaged in a camp up in I Corps called A Chau, A-102. There are four corps in Vietnam. I mean the whole country is divided into four separate groups of landmass, I guess you would have to say. There's just a line drawn across a

map. Of course, you can't see it on the ground, but it's divided into four corps and each one is commanded by a three-star general officer, American officer, with his counterparts. And each one of those corps had its own MIKE Force or Mobile Strike Force battalion of the 5<sup>th</sup> Group. I Corps, based in Da Nang, had one but they were committed at that time so when their Camp A Shau got probed over on the border, the Nha Trang MIKE Force which was the 5<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group, he called it reserve but it's the only unit that he had that he could directly commit to a situation somewhere throughout the entire country of Vietnam and influence the action there. So, he ordered one company into Camp A Shau, and the first company of A-503, all Chinese, was moved up to Da Nang, and then airlifted into A Shau over on the border with Laos. Two days after, actually the next day, they were probed pretty hard and that night they started receiving mortar fire and various other type of weapons fire. Sam Carter, my predecessor there, he and six other Americans and 128, I think 128, 123, Chinese Nungs were sent in there to help reinforce Camp A Shau. Over a period of six days of standing off wave after wave after wave, night and day just about, they lost . . . Most of the people in their own unit was killed. Most of the troopers or the Chinese Nungs in 1<sup>st</sup> Company were killed. Of the seven Americans from Nha Trang that went in there with that company, three of them were killed and two of the Detachment A-102 that was on the ground in A Shau had been killed. And they were ordered to get out of there as soon as they could and to escape and evade. They were overran to the point that they had to abandon the camp and get out. They escaped and evaded as best they could and continued losing people until they finally were picked up by Marine helicopters from Da Nang. By the way, during the battle, Marine aviators tried to bring in helicopters for resupply and were shot down there at the post. As a matter of fact, on the sixth day when they were trying to evacuate the wounded and the people out of that camp, Marine fighter squadron, not a fighter squadron but a lift operation, I don't know what they call 'em in the Marine Corps, H-34 helicopters, and the unit commander, lieutenant colonel, was with them. They landed outside the camp and by this time the Vietnamese, young Vietnamese soldiers of A-102 just absolutely revolted and swarmed that helicopter to the point that it couldn't even get up off the ground.

*Wow.*

**Lee Wilson:** Up off the ground, it was hit by a B40 rocket and exploded, of course, and all onboard that helicopter were killed. That almost happened again, and finally they had to just pull 'em out of there, and they didn't hardly get anybody evacuated because the young Vietnamese soldiers just went nuts. Sam Carter, my predecessor, and what was left of his command, escaped and evaded for nearly three days, and they were picked up on the third day. Sam had been hit some 14 times, and so that is primarily the reason that Henry Gold called me in Killeen, Texas, and told me, "Lee, you better get over here because we don't have enough people to go around and we need you badly." Sam was an old Korean War veteran, and he had been awarded the DSC in Korea as a matter of fact, and he had just absolutely come to the end of his rope. You know, that happens. The pressures of command are tremendous anyway, and that particular fight took the starch out of him that he had left in his old life, and I replaced him. He did not want to come out of command necessarily but he understood that his effectiveness was being affected by this constant pressure, and that he needed to get into a position where he could rest a little bit. So they moved him up to the staff there at Nha Trang, and put me in command of his organization.

*What was the name of the unit that you were in charge of, sir?*

**Lee Wilson:** Detachment A-503, MIKE Force. MIKE is simply the phonetic alphabet word for M, mobile. Mobile was the deal. Our responsibility was the entire country of South Vietnam, to be deployed anywhere in South Vietnam at any given time on orders from the 5<sup>th</sup> Group commander 'cause we were his reserve unit. When I got there, Sam had already received orders to replace the Nungs with Montagnards. We didn't have an army. You know, we didn't have any, a pool of mercenaries waiting to get into the country, and the Montagnard people were good people. They lived in the mountains. They were aborigines, so to speak. They were born there but not recognized as citizens by the Vietnamese government, and were treated horribly. So the Montagnards hated the South Vietnamese but they loved the Americans because we treated them as equals and we gave them support, medical support which they'd never had in their life. Gave them an opportunity to have a job although it was deployed away from their little villages out in the hills, and it was a marriage made in heaven so to speak, and it gave us a ready-made pool of manpower that we took advantage of throughout the country of South Vietnam. Four Corps had a few Cambodians and at one time some Laotian soldiers, but mostly they had the Montagnards that lived, that were organic to that corps area. Each corps area had that same situation. I'm not explaining this very well but they were allowed to recruit the Montagnards into their units as mercenary soldiers. We gave them uniforms and boots. They're called Bata boots. They were little black rubber boots but they'd never even had shoes in their life. Well, we got them usually at the airport. They flew 'em in, Air America flew 'em in. They were dressed in a loin cloth, some of 'em still carrying a crossbow, and that's all they had. They didn't have a closet full of clothes. So whenever we issued them a tiger suit or the uniform, we issued them two of 'em, they were as proud as they could be of these clothes. And they just looked at the boots and walked around in 'em looking at their feet 'cause they never had shoes before.

*Wow.*

**Lee Wilson:** And we gave 'em a place to stay in our barracks we built there in Nha Trang. And we had a mess hall for them staffed with the cooks from their homeland, and it was a different way of life but it was the beginning of a marriage made in heaven for Special Forces. We had accomplished the recruiting portion of our mission, and I was authorized five rifle companies. And by this time in order to be responsible for the entire corps, South Vietnamese area, it wasn't possible to do that with two rifle companies. They were just gone all the time. And then by losing one in A Chau, when we got back, when they got back to Nha Trang, the ones who survived, they were in the hospitals there, the other company, 2<sup>nd</sup> Company, had been alerted to go into A Chau, they all resigned. They were mercenaries. They were not under contract to the American government even though they followed 'em. But they decided that they could make as much money being static guards with RMK-BRJ construction company as they could with MIKE Force, and they wouldn't have to go out in the field if they were static guards. So they saw those just resigned in mass. So, actually when I got there, we had two brand new Montagnard companies that were untrained. They had just been recruited by Sam and his people, Sam Carter I'm talking about, and the NCOs that were assigned to him. They did not have an executive officer at that time. Did not have a counterpart at that time. So, I had a job ahead of me that I had no idea how I was gonna get from A to Z but I knew that it was an opportunity that would probably never come around again in my lifetime as an officer in the Army.

*It was a one-year tour, right?*

**Lee Wilson:** It was a one-year tour, and I was a young captain. No captain in the world had five rifle companies under his command, and this was just something that I had to learn a lot of different things very, very quickly.

*And then when you did your one year which was in '66 . . .*

**Lee Wilson:** Yes, we bypassed those combat jumps 'cause they were made during this one year. I was called to headquarters to train by Colonel Kelly one day and he said, "Willie, I want you to go ahead and train your troops for airborne infiltration." And I said, "Sir, we just got these guys here out of the jungle. I don't know about the first time they ever rode or heard of an airplane was when they were flown down here from various places across the country." And he said, "Well, we need to find out if they can take it, and we need to find out if they can jump, and we need to get that capability under our belt here so if we have to infiltrate you somewhere by parachute, we can do it." Now he didn't have to explain all that to me but he took the time 'cause he could see that I was not only kinda shocked but kinda surprised with this. And I certainly was not staffed to do this, so he gave me three additional NCOs. I now had 18, and I had a new executive officer. So the 18 of us, we were supporting Project Omega which is a long-range reconnaissance unit with two rifle companies. Those two companies were the Company Omega. When they deployed to the field, they would set up as perimeter security for the operational base as well as a reaction company in case the recon team got into something out there that they couldn't handle or . . . They weren't out there to handle any combat. They were out there to sneak and peek and look and report. And if they bumped into something that was bad, and they often did, then we were there to help 'em out. I had two rifle companies doing that, and I deployed with them on the first three assignments, and then I got to alternating with my executive officer before this mission came down to qualify 'em for airborne. So, I put the executive officer in charge of that because I was being deployed all the time into the field, and we built a mock-up of an aircraft there in the compound in Nha Trang so we could practice mass exits from the aircraft. We built PLF platforms, parachute landing fall platforms, that they could practice landing from. We built a small swing landing trainer that has a harness of a parachute and it lets you hang in that harness and swing out as though you were coming down and oscillate back and forth, and then as you're about ready to hit the ground, they cut the rope and turn it loose and let you hit the ground like you would for a normal parachute jump. So those three items we built there in the compound to help us with this airborne training. And then we took a Jeep and hooked it to the parachute rigging harness, and pulled the people backwards as though they were being drug by a parachute that was inflated on the ground, and let them recover, teach 'em how to recover. There was a technique that we used to roll and get up on your feet so you can get around behind your canopy and collapse it if you're being drug. And then we took 'em down to the beach there at Nha Trang with a Deuce and a Half and let them practice going out the door, out the back of the Deuce and a Half actually, and then landing in the sand there to practice their parachute landing fall. So that was basically the ground training phase of our airborne operations, and we gave 'em one week of that. And, of course, every morning we had the PT runs and the physical fitness. This is something that they were not used to. They had too much pride to fall out on the run, but we found out that they could do it. They had the stamina to do it, it was just hidden within their bodies. They never had used it before. They didn't have to run out in the jungle. They walked very carefully. They could track a gnat across a granite rock, I believe. But we gave them one week of ground training and then two parachute jumps to qualify them for their American wings. And the first two jumps they made were in the rice paddies

across the street from the 5<sup>th</sup> Group headquarters there, sand patch out there really. They flew out of Nha Trang. Air Commando Squadron there had C-47s, old C-47s from World War II, and that's what we used to practice or to actually make our first jumps. And I had a policy on my team. I said, "You know, the Montagnards will follow an American down the barrel of a cannon. Therefore, I want every jump to be led by one of you Americans here. They'll follow you out the door. I don't think we are going to be very successful in pushing them out of that aircraft to start with." So, all of us were in that situation where we had to lead. I'd put myself on that list too, and we were just going up and down like a yoyo. I don't know how many exact parachute jumps we made during that training period but it was so successful that Colonel Kelly not only got us ready to deploy that way, he started sending other MIKE Force units in from over the country to go through our airborne school there. So, we trained all five companies of my MIKE Force, the A-503, for airborne qualification, and before we even got the last company trained, he said, "Lee, I've got to find out if this unit can function as a unit from the air." So he set up a test, gave us a mission about 35 miles north of Nha Trang into an area there. They found a drop zone that they called a drop zone. In the jungle, it's nothing more than a big clearing with some rice paddies, and they dropped us. One rifle company and the recon platoon from Headquarters Company were dropped in there like simulating a tactical airborne operation. And it worked to perfection. I've never been so proud of a bunch of NCOs in my life as I was that day when they performed this miracle. I only lost . . . I had very few jump casualties in spite of the fact that we landed in these rice paddies that were hard as cement. Golly, hadn't had any water in 'em in a while, and they were dried out and hard as a rock. I had one young Montagnard was killed on a drop, and I think two others were wounded, broken legs or something like that when they landed, and they were all medevac'd out of there real quickly. The assembly program worked as it should, we got on our objective as we should in the timeframe we were allotted, and it was a total success, in my opinion. Along with me and my staff, we had a lieutenant colonel jumping with us who was actually my boss. He was from E Company, Echo Company of 5<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group, and he had . . . A-503 was assigned to E Company for the first time. So, he made that jump with us and he assessed the operation with me, and we reported to the 5<sup>th</sup> Group commander that, as far as we were concerned, these boys were ready for whatever come up. Well, it wasn't long after that that we got our first mission, and it was in Bunard which wasn't anything at that time. It was supposedly an area that had been cut by the French years ago when the French Indochina War was going on. They selected this area, part of it as a drop zone, and they were going to build a new Special Forces camp there at Bunard, and they wanted us to drop in there and secure that area for a whole flock of helicopters that were coming in to bring in the new troops for that camp. They didn't know what was there necessarily. They knew they had some enemy activity there but they didn't know how much. And we had an opportunity to attend a briefing in Saigon from the Air Force and the intelligence folks from MACV headquarters. They told me that the vegetation on the drop zone would be six inches to a meter high, and when we made this jump, it was in trees that they didn't know were there, 100 feet tall a lot of it, and I had to burn 116 parachutes hanging in the trees, and got that mission accomplished with very, very few casualties. I had no one killed. I was hurt myself on that jump. At 700 feet which is jump altitude in combat jumps, you don't have time to do much more than check your canopy to make sure you have a parachute up there and then cut your \_ bag loose. That's a bag that's hanging on the lower line. It's actually tied to your right leg, and whenever you get out of the aircraft and check your canopy, you reach down and pull a little line that releases that bag that drops down to 15

feet below you. And by then you're preparing to land because you're swish, swish, swish, and you're on the ground.

*Sure.*

**Lee Wilson:** And my \_ bag caught in a tree and just slammed me right down on top of a big tree stump that had been cut years ago by the French. I thought I had been impaled after the shock went away of the landing. I thought I was feeling moisture underneath my back, what part of my back . . . I couldn't feel anything from my waist down. But what had happened, I had burst . . . Both my canteens had burst when I hit that tree stump.

*Okay, makes sense.*

**Lee Wilson:** But I couldn't move. I was laying there on this tree stump and I kept looking, trying to look straight down to see what was sticking up through me. I just was positive in my own mind that I had been impaled by something. Well, it didn't happen. And finally I had made a hole in the elephant grass there about six or eight feet in diameter, and everybody didn't get out of the airplanes on the first jump. The planes had to go around and make another pass. There were nine C-123s that we were jumping from. Well, as I lay there, everything was real quiet. Then I could hear the planes coming again, and I could see up through this hole the planes going over and the troops jumping out of 'em. And it got real quiet again and I heard somebody land, oh gosh, 20 feet from me, or at least I heard some noise 20 feet from me. I didn't know what it was, and I couldn't get to my rifle, my pistol, my knife or anything. I's just laying out on this stump. And finally one of my three bodyguards which I didn't tell you about, I always had three of those guys under Colonel Kelly's advice. You know, he said you had to be seeing your own unit, surround yourself with people that you trust. Well, I had three bodyguards and they were the same ones that Sam Carter had before me, so they could be trusted. But one of 'em who was standing right behind me in the aircraft when we jumped . . . I jumped first on that jump, and he stayed in the door so they had to pull him out and get everybody else out, and then he jumped the second time or they threw him out, I don't know which. He was the one that landed about 20 feet from me, and as he was going through the elephant grass, he literally tripped over me. Scared the heck out of both of us. I didn't know who he was and he didn't know anybody was down there. He was just holding on to me and called, "Dai-uy" this and "Dai-uy" that. That's captain in Vietnamese, and he was so glad to see me, and I told him, "Get the heck off of me and get my parachute out of that tree so we can get on with our mission here." And he had to cut me a crutch. I couldn't hardly walk with my legs. And as we got ready to go to the assembly area, along came Major White. He had been on the pathfinder team that jumped 30 minutes ahead of us that morning, and I don't know why he was down on the end of the drop zone there but the assembly area was always on the other end. I could've very easily jumped last and landed right in the assembly area but I chose to go the other way and lead rather than follow, and I knew the Montagnards would react to it a lot better if we led them out of the aircraft rather than pushed 'em out of the aircraft.

*Sure.*

**Lee Wilson:** Anyway, we got on the ground, all three rifle companies. All three of 'em got on their objective under the guidance of their good NCOs, and we accomplished that mission with very little problem. There were small arms fire received as we were making the jump. The lead

aircraft that I was in, the crew chief reported to us back in Nha Trang about a week later that his aircraft had taken 14 rounds in the fuselage and the wing areas. I didn't know it when we were up there, of course, because I was too busy making my drop zone checks and everything. I was jumpmaster in the lead aircraft so I had a lot of . . . I was busy as a cat covering up crap, so to speak. I didn't have time to hear anything. I saw some puffs of smoke on the drop zone. As a matter of fact, I have a picture of that drop zone that was taken by . . . Several photographers were onboard the airplane.

*Yes sir.*

**Lee Wilson:** I don't know who took it but nevertheless you can see the puffs of smoke going off down there.

*Yes sir. Well, sir, I know we could probably sit and talk all day. These are amazing stories. Unfortunately, we're already well over an hour, and I have to give up this conference room I reserved. I'm past my time on it.*

**Lee Wilson:** Okay, I apologize for that.

*Oh, no sir. These are great stories, and probably need to set aside more time to get more of these because, like I said, I think you could probably tell me eight hours of stories.*

**Lee Wilson:** I'm petrified of the fact that I leave somebody out if I'm not careful so I try . . . There are two more of these jump stories that I know about. I left Vietnam in '66 to come back home to go to school, and then went back again in '67, and finally I ended up being there three years and then I retired in 1984. That sort of wraps it up I guess.

*Yes sir, and like I said, we can schedule another time to go into more detail on some of these other stories, but I wanted to thank you, sir, for letting us record this interview with you. On behalf of Commissioner Patterson and everyone here at the Land Office, we're all very thankful for your service to our country. That's what this program is about, is about honoring our veterans but at the same time, keeping their stories for posterity. We have documents here at the Land Office that go back to the 1600s. We have Stephen F. Austin's registro that he kept in his own hand of the settlers that came to Texas with him. We have the land grant that David Crockett's widow received when he was killed at the Alamo. And so our goal is to put these interviews into those archives so potentially many hundreds of years from now people can listen to these interviews and perhaps learn something from them. With that in mind, is there anything you would want to say to somebody listening to this interview well after you and I are both gone?*

**Lee Wilson:** You know, that's a got'cha question almost. I am so thankful to be alive in spite of the fact, of all the things I went through over there, and I'm so proud to be able to add a little bit to this continuing history chronicle that you guys are doing. And we're so grateful and so thankful to you and Commissioner Patterson for what all you've set up. It's just an honor to be a part of it. I hope that someday some young historian will be able to use this one little tidbit that I've added here for something of historical significance. I look forward to continuing it, James, if it's possible.

*Absolutely, sir. And also, if you have any pictures or anything like that that you want us to put on the website at some point, I can always get copies of those from you or we can get originals and*

*scan them and keep the scanned copies and send the originals back to you or whatever you'd want to do with that.*

**Lee Wilson:** Okay, I do have several of those. I didn't have a camera in Vietnam but somebody was always taking pictures so that's why I'm in most of 'em.

*Yes sir. We love to add pictures to the website when we can. It's always worth a thousand words.*

**Lee Wilson:** If you tell me how to do that in a written correspondence some way, I will be more than happy to provide those to you.

*Yes sir. I'll do that soon. And, again, thank you very much for letting us interview you. It's been an honor for me. We'll have all these CDs to you here in the next couple of weeks.*

**Lee Wilson:** Well, bless your heart, James. It's been an honor for me also. Thank you so much for considering me.

*Yes sir. Take care. I'll talk to you soon.*

**Lee Wilson:** Okay, James.

*Yes sir, bye.*

**Lee Wilson:** Bye.