

# Neal Morgan

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Cohen: Hi, and my name is Leah Cohen. Today is June 12<sup>th</sup>, 2018. I'm very pleased to speak to Neal Morgan at the Pritzker Military Museum & Library. Neil was in the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division, the Big Red One, in Dĩ An in Vietnam. So, I thought [laughs] we could just start with some basic background questions like: Where did you grow up and what was it like?

Morgan: Well, I grew up in Oak Park, [Illinois]. We moved there when I was about five, before we lived out in Bellwood. But my dad had a job that was close to the city, so we moved [closer to town]. And my sister still lives in the house that I grew up in, so it's been our family dwelling for a long, long time now. And growing up in Oak Park was a very pleasant experience — they had a number of really good schools; the grade school was a block from my house. I mean, it was like there was no bus rides! [Both laugh] The library was right there, there was a grocery store a block and a half away. I mean, everything was right there — the doctor's office. We could walk two blocks to get to the doctor. The doctor did house calls at that time, back in the day. It's been a while since they do that I know. There's a major hospital, West Suburban, it was like six blocks away or something like that. So, we were just very comfortable where we were at. The house was a really big, old house, the lot size was probably twenty-two feet wide or something like that. So not a whole lot of space between the houses, but there were playgrounds and there were parks all over the place. So, we never wanted for any space to play.

Cohen: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

Morgan: Well, I'm the oldest. I have two brothers and one sister and we're all about three years apart. So, one pretty well planned out family, I guess. [Both laugh]

Cohen: What did your parents do?

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<sup>1</sup> Neal Morgan edited this interview to facilitate readability after reviewing the initial, near verbatim transcript. Additions and alternate phrasing have been indicated by brackets. The content has not been changed.

Morgan: Well, my mother was a housewife, which was pretty much common during the time, and my dad worked as a foreman at Dean Foods. He was in charge of the freezers, which means he was in and out of freezers that were probably like forty degrees below zero, keeping the ice cream frozen and all this other stuff, so. [Cohen laughs] And he worked night shifts, so we didn't see him a lot. He got paid a differential. He chose that because supporting a family of four on his own, he spent a lot of time working. We were never really rich by any stretch of the imagination, but we didn't want for anything, we had everything we needed. So, he was a great provider, and we had a very pleasant lifestyle, and I never really felt threatened by anything. So, it was pretty comfortable as I think back about it. Back then, all of my traumas [were], "Oh, I couldn't get a date for the prom." Or this and that, but. [Cohen laughs] Not in comparison to what's going on today. Our lifestyle was so idyllic, comparatively. It was a nice time. And when I got drafted that's when [laughs] my education really began, I guess.

Cohen: [softly] Yeah, yeah, yeah. What did your mother do – did she take care of the kids?

Morgan: Yeah, she did. I mean, we lived in an area where... if we went down the street and we were playing in somebody else's backyard, or on top of somebody else's garage or climbing somebody else's tree, the people there would watch and if there was a problem, they'd call and tell Mom and they'd take care of it or they would just correct us as we needed it [Cohen laughs] without any problem. Everybody sort of took over parental roles [of] the kids, because most of the women in the neighborhood that I lived in were staying at home all day. So, there was a good eye on what's going on and, I mean, during the summer, the rule was you'd have to be home before the street lights came on. That was about it. [laughs] So we were always running around doing something, playing baseball in the street or whatever.

Cohen: An easier time.

Morgan: Yes, yes. It was a nice time.

Cohen: Was there any military background in your family?

Morgan: Well, my dad came up from Kansas with three cousins to join up after World War II started, and three of them wanted to be in the [U.S.] Navy, one of them wanted to be in the [U.S.] Army. So, they went to the Navy first and they had to take this physical, which I guess was a very grueling physical, and the only one that was accepted into the Navy is the one who wanted to be in the Army. And

since the [Cohen laughs] other three couldn't get in the Navy, they joined the Army. So, it was just a complete reversal of what they wanted to do to begin with. And [my dad] never went overseas. He had trouble with the varicose veins, and he had trouble with his hearing, he was in artillery. So, they never sent him over there, but he served his time. Most of it was in Maine, I think, is where he was stationed. That's when he met my mother, coming back to Chicago or whatever. And... that's why I'm here. [Both laugh]

Cohen: When you were still in high school, or later on in colleges, were you aware of the Vietnam War? And yeah!

Morgan: [speaking at the same time] Yeah, I was aware of it, but I mean it wasn't impacting me. I knew nobody who was over there. I mean it was on the news, but mostly what I remember seeing on the news at the time was not the war itself — even though a lot of it was televised — it was the all protests against the war is what I saw. So, and I thought we were doing okay over there. I had no idea. I mean, like I say, it wasn't personally impacting me. I was pretty sure I didn't want to be over there from what little I had seen [Cohen laughs] but I really didn't give it much attention. It was never — [Cohen sneezes] bless you — a priority with me or a concern. So, it was never a problem.

Cohen: Yeah. In your memoir, **Shot At & Missed**, you mentioned that twice you were drafted and you were told to go home, but then you did insist on being drafted a third time. Would you like to recount?

Morgan: Well, I got a draft notice and I was a little appalled at the time because nobody else that I knew had received that little invitation. So, I wasn't sure what to do about it. I think my first date was supposed to go in in February or something. And a week and a half later, I got a letter from Draft Board saying to disregard the notice, that they would take it up for review at the next board meeting, whatever. And about six weeks later, I got another draft notice, and then after that, I got another notice saying that, "You don't have to come in." [Cohen laughs] I didn't know at the time, but my mother was calling anybody who would take her call trying to try to get me out of the Army. I had no idea this was going on, honestly. I mean I should've, but I was either very naive or just not paying attention, I don't know. But she was calling every politician and anybody she could think of at the Draft Board and she was getting down on me. And finally, I got a third notice. Before they sent me another letter saying not to do it, I called them up and said, "Look, I don't have a deferment. I'm no longer in college. I don't necessarily want to go in the Army, but I want to, you know, fulfil my

obligation to the country. So, I don't have any exemptions not to be drafted." So, they never sent me another notice not to come in, so. But the day I went in, we went over to Forest Park [Illinois] [which] was where the group was getting together to go downtown, at the American Legion I think or VFW [Veterans of Foreign Wars], I forget. But anyways, they told me to go home when I got there. [laughs]

Cohan: Why did they tell you to –?

Morgan: [They] said, "You're not on our list, you should be going home." They [said], "You've got an exemption. Get out of here." I said, "No. No. Wait. Wait." [Both laughs] I don't have an exemption. I was getting tired of saying goodbye and I just felt it was time. And I was kinda looking forward to the adventure, I think, at the time, honestly. So, they sent me downtown, same thing, told me to go home. They didn't have my paperwork. So, all the people that I had gone in with – and I knew some of the people when we met in Forest Park from high school and from the neighborhood – but they all were processed in long before my paperwork made it back downtown. So, when I went in, I had nobody that I knew, and it was with a whole new batch of [people all going to a different place]. So, it was quite an experience. I mean, it was a long day. [Both laugh]

Cohen: Why do you think your mother didn't tell you that she was trying to get out –?

Morgan: [Speaking at the same time] I think she was trying to protect me. She was just very worried about the war. And like I say, honestly, I didn't realize how bad it was. I mean this was early in '67, April of '67, when I was drafted. And the war was really starting to ramp up, there were some really bad experiences going on. The body counts were adding up quite quickly. So, she was absolutely terrified of the whole situation and so she was doing everything that she could, and she just didn't want to scare me, I guess, so. But she was a very dedicated and she was just appalled that I still wanted to go in, so. [Both laughs]

Cohen: So here you are, like, you're in the downtown; unfortunately, you're separated from your acquaintances. So, is that when they decided to send you for basic training or was there a timeline?

Morgan: [Speaking at the same time] Well, yeah. You had a pretense of a physical exam. I mean if you could stand up [Cohen laughs] and not fall over, you'd pass. They did send us into a room where we had to count off by threes and all the ones on one wall, [and the twos and threes on the others]. And they drew a number out of a hat, and I think it was the number twos and they were being drafted into the

Marines, because they'd had such heavy losses in Vietnam that they needed to draft for the Marines for the first time since World War II.

Cohen: Wow.

Morgan: So that was an indication that it wasn't going on so good over there. But I was not a number two or whatever. And most of the people that they pulled out to go into the Marines, almost all of them came back to us because they couldn't pass the Marine physical. So, [the Marines] were much more intent on making sure you could handle the rigors [of training]. And so after that, they put us on a train to go down to Fort Knox, Kentucky, and that's where our batch was scheduled to go. They had a class opening or whatever. They had I don't know how many base camps in the country, how many training camps, but quite a few. And Fort Knox was for the armor, they had the tanks and the canons and all that stuff there. And so we went there. When I got to Fort Knox, they had started distributing some of your equipment and then they started to do testing to see where you would best fit in the Army. And the first day and a half, everybody there took all the test[s]. The next day, there was probably about fifty or sixty of us that were taking that tests, the next day there was about fifteen of us. And the next day after that, there was like three of us. And I think I took a test the following day also. I took every test they had to offer [Cohen laughs] and I was, believe me, not a scholar. I never really excelled in school in any way or fashion. I was just trying to get through it. That's all my main goal was. And they started offering me all these exotic schools. You know, being in computers, which I didn't even know what that was at that time.

Cohen: [softly] '67, yeah.

Morgan: Yeah. And then there were all types of office roles, accounting, and I can't even think of all the schools they offered me, but it was all contingent on me extending my tour. I'd been drafted for two years and they were offering me schools that were up to seventy-eight weeks long, so a year-and-a-half long. But I'd have to extend for two years to get that. And I didn't know a whole lot about the Army but what I'd seen in the first week or so was enough to convince me it was not going to be a career choice I was going to [willingly] make. So, I bowed out of, you know, going on. They really pushed me into it and then they tried to get [me to sign up for] OCS [Officer Candidate School] and I said, "No. I really don't want to be in OCS."

Cohen: You mentioned some, let's just say, unorthodox ways of trying to persuade you [Morgan laughs] to sign up for OCS.

Morgan: [speaking at the same time] Well, yeah. Later on in training [both laugh] they would come into our building and they'd wake me up at three o'clock in the morning and tell me I had a board meeting with the colonel. I mean, I had only been in the Army for three or four weeks. I don't know any colonels, I mean, [both laugh] what are we talking about? I was just crawling in the mud the day before, and now you want me to go meet somebody in an office! What's going on? And they got me in there and the colonel said he didn't understand me and why I wouldn't want to go to OCS and I had such a great opportunity and they really needed people like me. I told him, "I'm not interested. I really am not. I'll do my best to do my duty, but I don't really want to be in a supervisory role or being responsible for other folks. [That's something] I just don't feel is right for me." "Okay." Two days later, same thing again. Three o'clock in the morning, they wake me up, I'm gonna clean off my fatigues as best I can, spit polish my boots, borrow an iron so I can get everything crisp. And after about the fourth time, I asked the colonel what was the procedure for getting out of OCS if I was to join. He says, "You have to write a letter of resignation." I said, "That's it!" I joined up on the spot. [both laugh] Their little tricks worked on me. [Cohen laughs] So I was in a program for a while, anyways.

Cohen: So, like what were you doing in the basic training, like after the test-taking...tasks?

Morgan: [Speaking at the same time] Well, after that, they had... two goals. One was to build you up physically. So, there was a lot of PT [physical training], a lot of running around, a lot of exercising, a lot marching, a lot of long, you know, treks up and down the hills. And in Kentucky, that was interesting, that's for sure. And then they would try to break you down mentally. So, there was a lot of harassment. And just they wanted to get you to the point to whatever they said you were gonna, you were gonna do it. They wanted to make sure you knew which end of the rifle to shoot out of, but they didn't care if you knew much more than that. And I saw some people there, honestly, that should've never have been in the Army. I mean, they did not have the mentally capacity to communicate properly and to react and stuff like that. But they were still trying to force them through. They failed one guy in our basic training group where he had to take it all over again, and this guy was... I would have to say from my definition, as I understand it, he was an idiot. He just couldn't comprehend what was going on. He was always smiling [but] couldn't do a thing. [Both laugh] You tell him to turn right, he'd turn left, you know. It was a sad situation. I'd like to think they didn't take him in because he didn't deserve to be there.

Cohen: [Softly] Yeah, yeah. Too much for him, yeah. [Softly] Yeah. I think you mentioned that after the basic training and I guess after you signed up for the OCS, you went to the advanced individual training in Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri.

Morgan: Yes, right.

Cohen: So, what was that like? Was your leadership preparation course part of this AIT right away? How did it work?

Morgan: Well, because I was in the OCS program they wanted to get me into a leadership role. So, they had a two-week course that they called “Leadership Preparation Course,” I think. And we called it “Lollypop School.” [Both laugh] But it was two weeks of OCS basically where you had to really have everything just perfect. I mean, there couldn’t be a speck of dust in the barracks. Your bed had to be able to flip a quarter on. Everything had to be squared. Your clothes had to be hung just so in your lockers. Your shoes had to always be spit polished. And you were going out and running in the dust and dirt and you had to come back and clean everything. And they had a full inspection every morning. And if there was anything wrong, you got a demerit. I can’t remember, I think if you had twenty demerits — I can’t remember what the number was, I think it was twenty — they would kick you out of the program. Well, no one wanted to be a failure and be kicked out the program. I mean, I came back and they had left me a note on my bunk telling me that I had gotten three demerits for having cotton balls in the pants of my pockets that were [in my dirty clothes bag hanging] at the end of my bunk. [Both laugh] It’s like, you know, I don’t know what you guys want but that was note one of my biggest concerns.

Cohen: Just out of curiosity, what does it mean to flip the quarter on the bed? That it’s made so tautly that it —?

Morgan: [Speaking at the same time] Yeah. Right. You had to really tighten it up. I mean in basic training, I flunked that one the first couple of times. You end up doing twenty pushups a couple times, you figure, “Okay, I can make this tighter. I can do it.” [Both laugh]

Cohen: Oh, gosh. You also mentioned the base was en-route from your family’s yearly visit back to the family in Kansas?

Morgan: [Speaking at the same time] Right. My dad grew up in Kansas. So, when we took the bus ride from Kentucky to Missouri, or “Misery” as we called it, [both laugh] I saw all the signs. I mean, there was the... the Burma-Shave [famous for advertising [along the side of the road (Interstate 44, Route 66)] in Missouri, you

know, the four or five sayings in a row that you would see one after the other — it was a little bit of a joke — and the... oh, the old Mule Trading Post, old Mule Trading Post. I mean, you saw these signs for a hundred and fifty miles before you got up to this not much bigger than a gas station little gift shop. You know, that's all it was. And sides of barns and the roofs on old barns were all painted with all these signs to you know see Daniel Boone's home or whatever they were trying to hawk. But it was a very scenic ride, I mean, it was fun because it reminded me of all the trips that we made to Kansas on vacation when I was a kid. So, it sort of softened the blow from one transition to the other.

Cohen: [Softly] Yeah. Made it a bit easier. I think you mentioned that your family stopped and visited you at the...

Morgan: [Speaking at the same time] Oh, yeah, right. They did. A couple weeks before I got through. Probably three or four weeks before I finished AIT, they stopped by on their trip. Yeah. And I had no idea they were coming, so it was kind of again one of these unrealistic or surrealistic experiences. All of a sudden, you're training troops and being yelled at or yelling at somebody or whatever and all of a sudden you got to go see your family. [Both laugh] But then we went out for lunch. Went off base to lunch. It was interesting. [Cohen laughs] But then it was back to the work as usual. When I came home three weeks later, I was home for a week, week and a half before went overseas. I remember I got a little bit of a break.

Cohen: Right before you head off. Would you like to tell the story that you told in the book about... being a leader and people who all sort of went AWOL [absent without leave] and?

Morgan: Well, I was a squad leader, and then when I first started in... Fort Leonard Wood, I had seventeen people in my squad. One I never saw. He went AWOL before we even had our first [Cohen laughs] formation. He was gone. I don't know what his problem was, but he was gone. And... I think the first week, another guy came up to me and said he had problems at home and I said, "Well, let me see if I can take care of him." And I was able to take care of him. Two people came up. Turns out they were sons of generals. And they had been forced by their families to follow in the footsteps of all their family members and become good soldiers, but both hated the Army. [Cohen laughs] And they felt privileged because they were sons of generals and they never had to march or to do something or in the rain, and they were being abusive to all the leadership around them. And they came up to me and told me they wanted to get out of the Army, and I told them



I'd try. And I went and talked to the commanding officer of our company and he said there's just no way, they've had way too many problems, they belonged in Fort Leonard Wood... no wait... Leavenworth [Fort Leavenworth, Kansas]. That's it, I'll get it right. They belonged in prison because they'd [done and said so many terrible things]. And when I came back and told them they couldn't hope for anything, I said, "You know, you got family that has a lot of prestige to it. I'm sure once you get through this, and as hateful as this is, you could probably get a pretty easy assignment somewhere. And I wouldn't worry about it, just tread water." Two days later, they ran away. So, I had two more, and all of a sudden, all the people in the company that had gone AWOL were in my squad.

Cohen: [laughs] Oh, no.

Morgan: We had... [both laugh] we had four or five squadrons and there was like four squads in each squadron. So, I was like one-sixteenth or one-twentieth, I forget, of the company, and all of [the deserters] were coming from [my squad]. And during the course of events over the time that I was there, two more [people from my squad went] AWOL. There were no other people that went AWOL, just in my company. [Cohen laughs] And they started thinking I was being too hard on these guys and I was pushing 'em too hard and I got to take it easier. I said, "There's nobody in this Army that's easier on people than me, trust me." I was not giving anybody a hard time on anything; if I could try to help them, I would try to help them. But I never considered [myself to be] much of a leader, to be honest with you, but I tried to help them, you know, pass their test and whatever else they had to do, so.

Cohen: Well maybe it was because you were easier on them?

Morgan: Yeah. Well, but these guys, you know... one guy who got a letter from his girlfriend that she was going to marry somebody else and she was pregnant with his child, but she needed to have a father there for the child and so he went away, he was going [home] to take care [of his situation]. [breathes out] Could never understand it. Couple of 'em I have no idea why they did it. I thought they were just trying to get me in trouble, so. [Both laughs] They did a good job of it. It was at that time that I decided to get out of the OCS program, too, because I was getting blamed for all these people who were going AWOL, which was not my fault. And I really just didn't care for the Army [and] the way they did business. When I was in Fort Knox, I mean, in Leonard Wood, we had a contingent of National Guard in our company. And these guys were not going overseas, they were going back home, they were just filling their obligation of

active duty for a certain period of time. And they were pretty well connected, apparently, and they didn't have to do KP [kitchen police] and they didn't have to do a lot of the more nasty calisthenics, and they got to train with the M16s when a lot of people did not because they had so few of 'em. I said, "These guys aren't even going overseas. Why did they have to learn about an M16 for?" But it was just all prestige, and, you know, I got so tired of it. I had a number of conversations with the captain that ran our company. And he always just blew my doors down, you know, and he said, "No. This is the way it is; this is Army. Get used to it." I says, "Oh, I don't think so." So I wrote up my resignation and I kept it in my pocket for a while and eventually I just turned it in.

Cohen: So, did they accept that your resignation?

Morgan: [Speaking at the same time] Oh, absolutely. Then they were all upset that I had resigned. [both laugh] I says, "It's okay." I told 'em, "Relax. I'll be all right." [both laugh] So yeah, and that was that.

Cohen: Yeah, like-- part of it like you said, you just were disturbed by the lack of equality.

Morgan: Right! It was —

Cohen: How the Army was running.

Morgan: I just didn't understand the mindset. I mean, it wasn't logical to me that you got people who are gonna be trained and go over and be in combat in Vietnam, and my thinking at the time — I didn't know — but I thought the M16 was the primary weapon used by anybody over there. And I was being trained as a combat engineer, and as a combat engineer, you're both building the roads and building bunkers and laying barbed wire, but you're also fighting. You're in combat. So you need to have a weapon you know how to use. We were being trained with M14s, which was by far much more accurate and a better rifle as far as I'm concerned. But it was much heavier and it was not as easy to carry around. The ammunition was slightly smaller for the M16 than for the M14. So it was a much easier weapon to deal with overseas, except they didn't work so well. I found out once I got over there.

Cohen: The M16s or the —?

Morgan: The M16s, they had a lot of trouble with the M16s. They had trouble with the carbon build up in the barrel and it was jamming. So, you'd be in a firefight and all of a sudden, your weapon was no good. [Cohen groans] And there's no way to clear it, there was no way you could fix it.

Cohen: [softly] Wow, wow, just — [both laugh] Jeez.

Morgan: That led to a lot of tragic consequences, but the M14 was what I had probably... more than half the time I was overseas before they ever issued me an M16. So that wasn't true that everybody was getting M16s.

Cohen: But that was the impression at the time?

Morgan: [speaking at the same time] Right. But I think a lot of people in the field had the M16s. The people in the support that were over there, they had the M14s. And most people don't realize it, but in the Army over there, eighty percent of the troops in-country are support. They're transportation, supplies, they're taking care of the food, taking care of the medical, and payroll, and stuff like that. I mean so many of the people over there are not directly involved with combat. Although at the time I was over there, it was pretty hard not to realize what was going on.

Cohen: So, going back a little bit, you mentioned after the advanced training, you were back at home before being sent to Vietnam. So actually, this reminds me of something else. I think you sort of wondered if you were being, in a way, punished by being sent to Vietnam versus Europe or elsewhere? Because I think, you know, there's a bit of a question around it.

Morgan: Well, I was on CQ [change of quarters] in our company because we had to have someone in the office all night long in case something came up, so someone could call for a medic or whatever else you might be needed at the time. [The MPs [Military Police] or whatever. And so you'd be in charge of quarters — that's what CQ was. There were ledgers there, and I started looking through the ledgers, and they had a list of all the names of everybody that was in our company. They used like a felt tip marker. Next to the names was either a red little dot which meant you're going to Vietnam; a blue one, which meant you were going to... Germany; or a green one, which meant you were staying the States. So I looked up mine, I had a blue one! I was going to Germany. But after I resigned from OCS, that little blue dot had a little red X in it with a red dot next to it. So, I wasn't punished, it was just that they didn't need me. [both laugh]

Cohen: I see, I see. You're there, okay, great.

Morgan: "Send him over there, it's where he wants to go. He's going." [both laugh]

Cohen: Okay, I see, I see. [both laugh] Well, how was your journey like to Vietnam? I think you mentioned you first went to Fort Lewis [Washington] to the personnel center for about a week and then everybody was sent over.

Morgan: As I started my trip, we went to Fort Lewis. They had so many people going overseas at the time that they couldn't accommodate everybody that showed up at the same time. So I was there for about a week plus, maybe eight days. And we had to do [drills], we had to do KP because they had nothing for us to do. Fort Lewis was a transportation depot, basically, sending people over there. And finally, I got on the plane and got to go over to Vietnam, but we had a number of stops. I mean, [we] had trouble with the plane. So we only got up to Alaska before we had to land. And the plane was so crowded. I mean, I was a lot thinner then, I wouldn't be able to get in one of those seats now. But I mean there were like four across with an aisle. Four, aisle, four. [laughs] And there [are] a lot of people on the plane, and we had to land because they had some kind of mechanical problem which they never explained. It was in Alaska somewhere, I can't remember where. And we were on the ground for an hour and a half maybe and then we took off. And then next stop was supposed to be Hawaii. Well, we didn't know how far we were going, I mean, we kept going and going and the next stop I think we ended up in Japan. [both laugh] We just kept on going. "Hey, we don't need Hawaii, keep on going!". Then it was Guam and then it was Vietnam. So, we had a number of stops. In Japan, we stopped for about eight hours, I think. They had more problems with the plane they had to fix up or something like that. "Do I really wanted to get back on that plane again? I mean [both laugh] they can't keep this thing going." And then I got there.

Cohen: Yeah. Yeah. So... I think you mentioned that even within Vietnam, you were supposed to go, assigned to go to one base but —

Morgan: Yeah.

Cohen: — you took a plane ride and...

Morgan: They put us on a big [Lockheed] C130 [Hercules], a big transport plane with a back that drops down, so you can walk in through the back end of the plane and get a seat. And I had orders, but the names as they were printed, didn't sound the way [I thought they would]. So the first stop I was supposed to get off, but I didn't know that. So I didn't get off at the first stop. And when the plane landed the second time I went up to the duty sergeant and I asked him, he said, "Oh, you should've got off back there. You better get off here [Cohen laughs] 'cause if you don't get off here, we're going up to the DMZ [demilitarized zone between

North and South Vietnam] and you don't want to go up to the DMZ." I said, "I think you're right." [Both laugh] I got off the plane. And Army efficiency, they just cut me new orders; instead of sending me back to the unit that I was supposed to go to, they sent me to the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division. So, it was just a mistake. It worked out for me pretty well, actually, but I mean it was just a mistake that I ended up where I did. They just cut new orders. "Here's your new orders. You're going this way now."

Cohen: Were you sorry that...?

Morgan: I didn't know what to expect. I really thought I was going to be a combat engineer and working in the field or working in a base camps and, you know, helping to beef up the security and maybe go on patrols. I had no idea what was gonna go on. I mean it was just all brand new to me. I was naïve, but it's like I said, I did think of as being an adventure, I guess. I got over that pretty quick. [both laugh]

Cohen: So, do you want to describe what the base camps at Dĩ An was like?

Morgan: Yeah. Actually, it's pronounced "Zi Ahn." Even though it says Dĩ. My parents still to their dying day called it "Diane," but it was Dĩ An. The base camps was very secure. It was the headquarters for the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division when I was there. And they had I don't know how many squadrons of helicopters there. Artillery was based there. We had a large compound of Korean soldiers that were there, and they served a tour in Vietnam for two years. So they were there for the long time. The average tour for anybody going to Vietnam was like one year. Then you could go home or you could extend, which is what they wanted. But the Koreans, they were really the soldier's soldier.

Cohen: Wow. How so?

Morgan: They did calisthenics three times a day. Five AM, noon, and about six PM. And they would be doing calisthenics for an hour, hour and a half; every day three times a day. I never saw much, I mean, they pretty much kept to themselves. But they were a good, tough group of people. So, our base camps really was very secure. We were only about nineteen miles from Saigon and... there were so many other targets. We got hit occasionally, but not very frequently, as far as attacks from the NVA [North Vietnamese Army] and the VC [Viet Cong]. We were not too far from the Ho Chi Minh Trail. So we did see activity from that as they were going back and forth As a rule...I mean, my first day when I first got there – before I even was assigned [and] knew I was going to be stationed at Dĩ An – we

had a[n] attack. I was just getting ready to go to bed and we had a Red Alert. They'd seen some NVA out beyond the outer wire and everybody had to go out there. I don't even think I had any ammunition, they had to hand me ammunition for my gun. I'd just gotten my M14, but I had [to] put it back together a little bit and then get out there and lay out on the perimeter for the whole night on top of a poncho. And nothing ever happened. It was all just hurry up and nothing. [both laugh] But I mean, so you never knew what was gonna happen out there. I think a lot of people thought that they were never in harm's way over there, but you were always in harm's way over there 'cause you never knew who the enemy was, what was going to happen next. I mean, like I said, the enemy did not wear uniforms for a good percentage of 'em. And so you just never knew what was going to happen.

Cohen: You know, you mentioned a few times when you were in direct danger: one of them when you were walking to the PX [Post Exchange] and the Tet Offensive. Do you want to talk about them now?

Morgan: Sure. We could talk about that. The first time I got shot at, I was on my way to the PX. And there was two ways: one was a little longer and one was a little shorter, but you had to walk along the inside of the perimeter. You're pretty close to where the bunkers were, but it was not normally a problem. I mean, it was not like we were in constant battles or anything like that. But as I was walking – I was about half way there – and all of a sudden, I heard a bullet buzz by my head. I never heard the shot. I just heard the bullet. And I stopped for a second because I was just shocked by that. And then I saw a bullet plow in the dust in the path way in front of me and I figured, "It's time to hug the ground." [both laugh] So I dove down and there were a couple [more shots that were fired]. I never heard anybody from our perimeter returning fire. And I don't know... silencers weren't used over there that I know of. I never really heard the shots, but he could've been a good distance away from me with a high-powered rifle or sniper rifle. But he never hit me, thank God. And as soon as the shots stopped coming, I just ran. I got up and ran as fast as I could and in [a] very erratic pattern – I was running the zig-zag, and I would stop and start again. I didn't want to become an easy target like you were just a...

Cohen: Like a predictable pattern?

Morgan: Right. I didn't want to move at a certain pace. So I just stopped, started, and zig-zagged. If there were any more shots, I never experienced them. I didn't know it.

But I got to the PX and it was very anti-climactic again. Here I am, "Okay, I'm safe. [both laughs]...They shot at me, no big deal **or** anything." You know.

Cohen: Well, did you report it to anybody?

Morgan: Yeah. Well, I told people at the PX. Some guys were going to take the same path, I said, "You wanna to think about going another way." [both laugh] But I mean I told three or four people and some said, "Eh!" They went on, so I don't think anybody got hurt that I know of. I mean, not that I knew. But when the Tet Offensive started, that was a different ballgame. No one expected that. Everybody expected a nice, easy time. It was the end of January, and I had guard duty and... no one expected anything to happen. I mean, we were told specifically, "Don't worry about watching the perimeter because nothing's gonna happen. We've signed a peace treaty, or there's gonna be an agreement. There's going to be no shots fired. None of this stuff. And you might hear some fireworks but don't worry about it, nothing's gonna happen." And so we were all very casual. We set up our defenses like we normally did and you know.

Cohen: What did that involve?

Morgan: Well, we take the M60 machine guns, and we'd put the [ammo] belts into both of them, make sure the safeties were on. But they were ready to go if you flipped the switch - safety, you could gauge them. We had the [M18] Claymore mines with the [clackers - triggers for the blasting caps] ... I can't think of the name of the term anymore. It's tough to get old. [laughs] They were armed and they were ready to go.

Cohen: Like the plastic covers or whatever those are?

Morgan: [Speaking at the same time] No, they had the little blasting caps. That's what it was. Put the blasting cap in a little receptacle inside the Claymore. And then just... take a look at the area to make sure the wires weren't cut or anything in front of us, and then settled in to... We had three to a bunker and during the course of the evening, two people had to be awake at all times. So one guy would sleep, and it was like a rotation. You get an hour's sleep or two hours' sleep if you're lucky. And then come midnight, it was my turn to finally get down and take a nap. So, I was laying down and all of a sudden someone's shaking me, saying, "You got to see what's going on!" So I woke up, and we could see the lights of Saigon from our perimeter, and all we saw was a big smoky haze with machine gun fires, tracers going up and coming down. From choppers and I guess jets or whatever. And rockets going in. It was just like a spaghetti bowl. I

mean, I just couldn't understand it. All of a sudden, we heard mortars coming in to our right, along the perimeter. And we decided it was time to see what the inside of the bunker looked like, so we dove into there and... we could hear 'em, we had an ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] base that was maybe a mile outside of our wire. And they were taking a lot of hits, they were getting hit hard. And they had a tower that was probably thirty feet tall in the middle of their base camps, and they had a .50 caliber machine gun that was on a 360-degree track around the top of this tower, so they could swivel and do whatever they wanted to do with it. What they couldn't do is they couldn't keep the thing pointed down 'cause of the repercussions, and they were lighter and the rounds kept rising and rising. All of a sudden, they were coming into our base camps, 'cause it's nothing for [a] .50 caliber round to travel a mile. [laughs]

Cohen: Oh, okay. So, they couldn't control exactly where it was going.

Morgan: Right. They were trying to aim down, and it just walked itself up, or maybe they were hurt, or I don't know. They suffered a lot of problems there, I know that. So, we had .50 caliber rounds coming in for a while. One went through our bunker. Thank God it was way high, so it didn't hurt anybody. [laughs] But it got your attention. [both laugh]. And the mortars stopped. I think it was more harassment than anything else. I mean, there was nobody injured in our base camps. I'm sure somewhere else in our camp --I mean for our companies we had a corner section of the perimeter that we took care of. So we had a pretty good size section. But no one that I knew from our company was injured. The Admin [administration] Company had... the numbers always elude me, I think, five-hundred-plus people that were stationed there that took care of awards and decorations and 201 files, payroll, and everything you could think of from an administrative point. And... with all those people, we never had anybody that was really seriously injured. There were a couple of incidents, but I mean not like that. And so, we survived it all. I mean, they brought infantry in to fill in the space between the bunkers and, you know, we were awake all night of course. But after that initial attack, we didn't have any incoming rounds.

Cohen: Can you describe what the bunker looked like?

Morgan: The bunker was a hole in the ground. It was probably... I would guess, maybe eight to ten feet wide on the inside, and it was dug deep enough that when you stood up, you were looking out a window that was pretty much at ground level. So, you were below grade, if something's coming in you could duck down and be fairly safe. There was a concrete shell or foundation, if you will. It was the base



of the bunker, and then they had sandbags piled up on top of that. And they actually put like railroad-tie beams that made a little box, basically, and they covered the box with a lot of sandbags. So we were pretty well secured from the normal fire, rifle fire, or mortar or any of that kind of stuff. We were pretty safe. The stairway was very narrow in the back and as you were walking out of the bunker up this little narrow stairway, you walked into a big box. So that was protecting the back door. You didn't have a door, but you had this box three feet away that was filled with sandbags. So if somebody got behind you, they couldn't shoot into the bunker very easily. So, we were protected from that point. And we had Claymore mines, we had a M79... grenade launcher, grenade guns, and... two M60 machine guns. The M60 machine guns were in a fixed position at [a fixed] angle because the adjacent bunkers, there was sort of creating a permanent crossfire. I mean, you had a little bit of movement, but you got maybe a ten-foot spread of what you could've moved the machine guns because the guy next door is going to be covering you too. I never knew of a time when I was there that we engaged the machine guns.

Cohen: Oh, so you didn't have to engage the machine [guns].

Morgan: [speaking at the same time] Right. They weren't rushing through the wires to get to us or our mine field or whatever. Tet started and it was very scary for everybody 'cause no one expected anything to happen. And they attacked Huế, and they attacked Saigon. But for all their efforts and all the harm that they did, they lost the whole offensive. I mean, within four, five months, whatever, they had not gained anything, and we had taken a lot of people out. I mean, they certainly attacked us and they certainly did damage, but we defeated 'em on every ground. But again, [as] we were talking earlier, we never kept the ground that we took. And [laughs] you'd have these battles, these terrific battle for hills and up in Khe Sanh, and we'd be victorious through these very terrible battles and then two days later we'd leave. So, what you're fighting for was... nothing. I mean, the sacrifices were for a mountain of dirt that no one wanted.

Cohen: Were you like aware of this at the time, the sense of —?

Morgan: [speaking at the time] I knew of certain things that were going on. I mean, we heard more rumors, most of 'em were not true. I mean, I can't tell you how many times I heard the war was over [both laugh] or that... [President Richard] Nixon had come over and he had been shot or something else had happened. I believed what I heard it from more than twenty people, you know, otherwise, it was just all types of rumors going on left and right. So we just sort of blocked it

all out, we didn't care. But, I mean, the year that I was there – I went over at the end of '67 [and] I was there through most of '68. It was an incredible year.

Cohen: Like you're saying, really a pivotal year.

Morgan: Oh, it's amazing. And so many things, good and bad, that happened. I mean, Martin Luther King was killed, Bobby Kennedy was killed, you had the convention here in Chicago which was a real disaster — and that's only the tip of the iceberg. I mean, there was many, many [things] – I think, Kent... [State] University [shooting] was at that time. It was terrible, just terrible things. And... the reason I wrote the book was to try to tell the story in hopes that maybe one person out there somewhere that might, you know, come across it might not let this happen again. But we're still fighting battles we can't win. We're still putting ourselves in harm's way, into other countries where wars are tradition and are never gonna go away. They're blood feuds. If one wins, the other one's gonna try and win back later. You can't win these wars. In urban warfare, first of all, the population is the one that takes the hardest hits. Even though you may lose soldiers, there's a lot of civilian deaths that are going on with all of this. And people who are willing to blow themselves up, I don't know how you stop that. You know, how do you fight that? [laughs]

Cohen: Right. Right. It's very hard. Yeah.

Morgan: [speaking at the same time] So, I mean I'm digressing quite a bit, I'm sorry.

Cohen: No. It's good. Of course, one of the questions is what are the lessons [laughs] learned? Yeah, so yeah.

Morgan: I would like to think we're an intelligent species. But somewhere ingrained into our DNA, we have to cull the herd every once in a while, and that used to be the whole mentality. War is a terrible thing, and like we're talking before, there was just so many things [that] happen that are criminal. I mean, they're not logical, they're just horrific examples of inhumanity. And it goes on and on and on. It doesn't ever stop.

Cohen: [Sighs] So, to go back a little bit.

Morgan: Okay. [laughs]

Cohen: So yeah, we talked about two times of danger. You mentioned two other ones as well, once when you were on a helicopter.

Morgan: Yeah. I had to go on a payroll run to Lai Khê [Base]. Anything I could do to get off the base camps was great. Let me go out and get out of here. I never felt like I was in harm's way. Like I said before, everybody was, but I never felt like that. I mean, I was young and dumb and... you know, just didn't feel threatened. I mean if someone shot at me, I'd shoot back at them. That's all there was to it. And thank God that didn't happen very often. But on this chopper flight, we got about half way up there and the chopper pilot started yelling that there was incoming fire from the ground. And I couldn't see it, he told me to try to take care of it. And I looked around, I couldn't see it, until the helicopter turned a little bit then I could see where the firing was being blocked by the machine gun I was behind. I and one of the MPs [Military Police Corps] were on a payroll run – 'cause I had shot the machine gun in training – I showed him [I knew] how to handle the machine gun. No one else on the plane, [most were] finance clerks, no one [knew how to] handle the machine gun. So, lucky me, I got to sit behind the machine gun. But I had a better view, so I was okay with it. [both laugh] Then all of a sudden, we saw these rounds coming up. So, I did fire off some rounds and [my shots] did hit close to the [rice field] intersection from where the fire was coming from, [and then the enemy fire] stopped. I have no idea what happened. I mean, I've always more or less justified it [by] saying, "He was doing his job and I was doing mine." And I don't know what happened. And I've never lost a minute sleep about that. I mean, this guy was shooting at us. We shot at him. I mean, but it was... at a distance. There was no immediate face-to-face contact. The consequences of whatever I had done were never really revealed. So, I don't know if I hit anything or not, if a guy just decided to dive into the rice paddy and hide. I mean, I have no idea what happened there.

Cohen: [Softly] Yeah. You do mention, though, another incident when you had to do the morning patrol, where it was –

Morgan: [Speaking at the same time] Yeah, there was a perimeter sweep. Yes, yeah. I mean, I liked perimeter sweeps because you got the whole day off. When you had guard duty, you got half the day off, which wasn't enough to recuperate from being up all night. So if you did a perimeter sweep in the morning, you got the whole day off, and it would only take about an hour or so to [complete the] perimeter sweep. And we got about halfway through the sweep, we were at the corner of our base camp, and I spotted a couple [of] NVA[s] with the pith helmets and their regular uniforms. And they were arguing with each other. And one was spitting and trying to hit the other and I was on point — lucky me — and the other guys hadn't even seen it. So I pointed over [at] them. And I

remembered, for whatever reason, some training manual where you would hold your rifle above your head straight up and point the barrel at wherever the thing was. And I did that at a lot of risk to myself, but no one knew what I was doing. No one had a clue, they were all close behind and they were just thinking, "What's he doing?" [laughs]

Cohen: They hadn't had had the training yet? [laughs]

Morgan: They had no idea. And then I started pointing over there and the next thing I know, bullets were coming at me, so I decided to hit the ground. And luckily, there was a tree that had fallen over right and I was behind it. And chips of wood were flying over my head from the incoming shots. And the sergeant was right behind me and he shout[s], "Don't return fire! We're in a no-fire zone!" [I] said, "Tell them that! [both laugh] They didn't get the memo!" I don't think I said that, but I mean, it was like I was never so instantly angry... in my life. I mean, I'm not Audie Murphy [a famous WWII hero with a long list of medals] or any kind of hero whatsoever, but I was pissed. I'm sorry. I had an M79, so I put a [grenade] round in the chamber and just struck it over the top of [the log], tried to guess about [where the enemy was], and I pulled the trigger. And it was called a "thump gun," [clapping noise] it would make a sound that sounded like a thump. And it would [fire] a little grenade, after so many revolutions it would be armed and when it hit it [exploded just] like a grenade. So, I lobbed two of those over there. And he's screaming at me, "There's a village over there! You can't." The village was a mile away. This thing had a range of, like, six hundred yards, maybe? If it had that many. [laughs] So I mean the village was okay. But the firing stopped, we called in choppers 'cause we were right outside our outer wire. And I thought the choppers would be there in ten, fifteen minutes. We had choppers all over the place. A good half hour later, they finally came out.

Cohen: Why so long?

Morgan: Well, they probably had to get a squadron up, and they weren't sure what was going on, and then they had to locate us, and they were looking for a verification from the towers and from the bunkers, "Did you hear anything? Where's the direction? Where's it coming from?" You know, so by the time they got all that information, the NVA they were gone, they were long gone. [The choppers stayed with us for the balance of the perimeter sweep. But I was still very concerned [both laugh] what else was] out there. I mean, it just happened so fast, and I could not believe that everyone was so [casual about what had happened]. They were walking right by our base camps and they could care less

if there were, you know, two thousand troops on the other side of that wire. [laughs] It was their land. I mean, that's the way Vietnam was. So, if you wanted to have something protected, you had to put security, a ring around it with barbed wire and bunkers and mine fields and guns, and whatever else. And in there, you're probably pretty safe. But outside that wire, all bets were off.

Cohen: [Softly] All bets were off, yeah.

Morgan: I mean, one time I came back from Saigon — I'd gone there on a supply run just for something to do. And it was fun. I mean, Tet had been over for like six months or seven months or whatever, and I was all excited about going to Saigon. I had never been to Saigon before. Plus, I could buy booze. I mean, this was a big deal. [Cohen laughs] You couldn't get booze on the base camps. Beer was all too old to drink. [both laugh] The beer was probably six, seven months old after sitting in the sun for that time. It was not a pleasant experience, drinking that beer. They would sell it for a dollar a case [at the PX] and couldn't sell it. The PXs couldn't get rid of it. They'd be stacks of it everywhere. [both laugh] I don't know what they ever they did with it, but I never bought it. But anyways, on the way back from Saigon, as we got close to our base camp, we went through this town that was very close. And it was very crowded with ox carts, bikes, push carts, and little [[Vespas [like a golf cart], and a scattering of trucks, but when]] we turned down [one street there was nobody] on it. Not [one vehicle or person].

Cohen: Is this like an ominous sign?

Morgan: Yes, 'cause the town is really crowded but not down this street — there's nothing. And all of a sudden, it's like, "This is not good." And we're in a Jeep, there's like four of us, and we each got a box of goodies that we're trying to keep. So we got a lot of stuff in the Jeep and four soldiers and we're trying to make ourselves low targets, I mean. And I put round in a chamber, took the safety off and pointed it straight up in the air in case we hit a bump it and it went off, it wasn't gonna shoot anybody. But I was ready to go. And... as we got almost to the end of the street where we were going to turn to go into the road that led to our base camp, a kid jumped out from behind a tree with a stick. [laughs] And he was pointing at me, and I had no idea. I had a split second to think, "What's this kid gonna do with that?" I didn't know if it was a gun, a stick, or whatever. And he was like ten years old. I just couldn't shoot him, I may have lowered my gun, [but I certainly didn't put my finger on the trigger. If he had been a VC, I wouldn't be here talking to you right now because he was very close]. He was

[closer to] me than that wall behind you. [laughs] And it all just happened like that, then the kid laughed, jumped up and down, threw the stick in the air, and ran away. “You have no idea, kid [both laugh] how close you came.”

Cohen: You described another shocking instant with a child, too, when you were dealing with the Medical Corps?

Morgan: Oh, yeah. That was sad. I went up on a payroll run. That payroll run was on our base camp. I walked over to the medics. The one who handled the medics was on R&R [rest and recuperation] so they had some payroll problems and they had a lot of things going on. So I went over see what I could do to help ‘em out and get their records straightened out. And while I was there, I had to wait for a while because they had a lot of troops coming in that had been in [an] ambush and these G.I.s that all got shot up, and they were taking care of them. That was the priority. So, I was just sitting there waiting and after they got them pretty well patched up, they took me into a room and started explaining what their problem was. And on the opposite wall — probably thirty feet away, maybe — there was this little girl, five years old in a white dress, just dirty, face is all smudged up, and she had this ten-thousand-mile [stare, and] tears were coming down her cheeks. I said, “What’s going on with that?” [The medic said], “Well, she was part of the... attack on the soldiers.” One of the soldiers was handing out candy bars and stuff to the kids and she had a pistol that was in a [small brown paper bag], and she walked up to him and put the bag into his stomach and pulled the trigger. And... what do you do with a five-year-old child and who does that? I mean, who sets up a [little] kid to do this thing? I mean, I was so appalled, it was the only time I remember crying in Vietnam. It just got to me. I said, “How can you do this?” That’s when I knew I [laughs] [was never going to extend my tour.] I mean, I had already figured that out, but that cemented it. [Both laugh] So it was very sad, I mean, the tragedies that you saw over there. Now I was a [just a payroll clerk]. I mean, I worked in an office all day long. I mean, I [actually] got out very little, and didn’t see much of anything that was going on. The few things that I had seen were incredibly tragic. You know, [it’s all very sad], but that’s the way war is. And the [other things I had heard], I mean, you have to just count a lot of it as being simple BS and that people are trying to tell stories just to get some glory out of it or whatever. But there are a lot of really sad tales that happened over there. I’m part of the American Legion. I’ve never been an active member there. I just don’t fit in, you know. [Most of the] guys were all in combat. These guys, you know, [were] all doing their different things, and I’m a

clerk. And we have as much in common as a cow and a goat, you know? [laughs]  
Both graze in the same field but we're not [both laugh] alike.

Cohen: So, a different mentality —

Morgan: Yeah!

Cohen: — even though you had to obviously know how to use ammunition, be quick and all that.

Morgan: Well, it's just part of being the rear echelon — like I said, which is the majority of the troops over there — and it's almost like you feel like you really didn't do enough. I mean, you could have been more to help somebody. But then again, it was such an insane war, what do you think you were going to do to really help? I mean, it's such a dichotomy and these people that know people who were killed that were over there that they were with. I mean, it's such a tragedy. I mean, I think I can see why people just never really get over it. I mean, there's a lot of Vietnam veterans that are still committing suicide. I just don't think they're the more recent veterans. That thought has never occurred to me, I gotta tell you. But I mean a lot of people out there just can't deal with the tragedy.

Cohen: [softly] With the tragedy, yeah, yeah.

Morgan: [speaking at the same time] Yeah, it just never goes away and the horror of it, I mean, it's terrible. And plus, you're talking about kids who are not mature: seventeen, eighteen, nineteen years old in combat. I mean, come on!

Cohen: Do you feel that being, I think you said, twenty-two or twenty-three made a difference in terms of how you handled things or saw things in comparison to others?

Morgan: [Speaking at the same time] Probably a little bit but not a lot. I mean, my experiences were nothing like what I had over there. I mean, my maturity level certainly wasn't very high when I was twenty-three years old. I was just a big kid for all intents and purposes. And I was just fortunate enough to have a little time and grade and a little experience in life before I went over there. But I mean, for most people that you would have in your [normal experience could ever prepare] you for that kind of a thing. I mean, you don't know. And like I say, things change in a heartbeat. From being nice to being really bad to being okay again. I mean it's so anticlimactic. And like I know I've mentioned before, but when I came home, it took me a while to get used to it—[mostly] I was not in combat. I was not in trauma all the time. I mean, I certainly had some

experiences, but I certainly didn't have the amount of experiences that the average trooper had in a week! I mean, during World War II — if I remember right, and I could be wrong here — but the average infantryman was in the field for about forty-five days a year. It was either getting there or whatever, digging in, securing places. But about forty-five days a year they were in combat. In Vietnam, it was more like 260 days or so. I mean, they were constantly out there! And doing these sweeps, you know, and they had free-fire zones. You know, the free-fire zone was where just any person, child, woman... person... was a target. Everybody in that area was a target, everybody was the enemy. You could shoot anybody you wanted. That was the meaning of a free-fire zone. I'm sure a lot of people discriminated a little bit and [then some did not, sometimes whole communities were attacked because one individual was scared.]

Cohen: [Softly] It's a terrible definition.

Morgan: But like I say, you never knew who the enemy was. The problem was our troops would go into a village looking for VC and looking for arms and the villagers would be panicked because the VC were [laughs] their neighbors. I mean, they were all around them and if they did anything, if they said anything, they would be attacked by them too. So, our guys would go in the troop and they'd say, "Have you seen —?" They would tell 'em nothing! And down the road that led out of their village, there could be booby traps or [an] ambush and never once did any villager say, "There's a problem up the road"... 'cause they were afraid! Yeah and it's like, wow. And then that's why the American soldiers say, "Who are we fighting for? These guys are not trying to help us. They let us walk into these traps, they let us get booby trapped, shot, whatever."

Cohen: Why are we defending them?

Morgan: Right. What's the point? So, there wasn't a whole lot of love losses — the bottom line.

Cohen: What were your own impressions of the Vietnamese people? Like, did you meet people on the base who [did] some work there and stuff?

Morgan: [Speaking at the same time] The people that I was in contact with — and I worked with a few of the office girls, mostly. They were with the officers for some reason. We didn't get too many office girls where I was at. [both laugh] And part of the duty I had when I was over there, we'd have a day where you'd have to go out with a group of twenty Vietnamese villagers that were cleaning



up an area, cutting the grass, picking up litter — this kind of stuff — and it was a lot of fun to be with these people. They didn't really want to work so you had to keep 'em movin' along. They would sit there and smoke every cigarette you had in your pocket, but they were fun. [Cohen laughs] I enjoyed their company and even though the communication, being awkward at best, we were able to talk, and it was fun. I mean, there was one woman I remember in particular, I thought she was about sixty-five. She had twins before I came home. [both laugh]

Cohen: Like, it's a little bit younger than sixty-five.

Morgan: [Speaking at the same time] I could've been wrong about that age. [both laugh] So, I mean, I didn't have anything against the people unless they... well, once I was outside the safety of our base camp, I was very concerned about anybody I walked up to. Any kid on a bike, I mean, I didn't trust anybody. But I didn't have that often 'cause I wasn't out of there very often. I was pretty much on that base camp most of the time I was there.

Cohen: So, do you want to describe your office work and how it progressed? 'Cause I think you finished as an E5 [sergeant] specialist.

Morgan: Right.

Cohen: What was it like?

Morgan: Well, when you get in country, you automatically went up one grade because I was an E2 [Private E-2], which is nothing in the Army. When I got to Vietnam, I became a... Private First Class, had the one bar. And to be a finance clerk, you had to be a Specialist Fourth Class, so I had to move up one more rank. When I first started in the finance office, I was just doing... distributing orders, and carrying communications between one office and another, and checking on this, and just doing mail call. I would be the guy carrying that huge bag with all the letters in it, and once a day I'd be [sighs] you know, yelling everybody's name or trying to pronounce 'em and handing out the letters and... slowly but surely as people...'Cause about a third of the company or better was going home, like in the next three months. That's why they pulled me out of the line to be in finance because they needed replacements. And they weren't sure who was gonna be coming down the road from [Fort] Benjamin Harrison, which is where all the finance people come from in this country, over in Indiana. [Cohen laughs] So they pulled me out because I had accounting in college and they thought I could do it. I had a little interview with the colonel when I first got there. It took me about a tenth of a second to decide that this was better than being out in the

field. I'll stay in this base camp. Thank you! And anyways, so I worked my way through the office and as guys were getting ready to go home, I would help them with their payroll. And the payroll was pretty straight forward. You had a voucher you had to type up. And you'd had to type the guy's name and his rank and anything — we all got combat pay, which was like another sixty-five dollars a month. I can't remember exactly what my pay was per month, but I don't think it was a hundred and fifty bucks, even with the sixty-five dollars... but... you learned pretty quickly. It wasn't that difficult of a chore to take care of all these different things. It was the peripheral things that you had to do in the office besides just the payroll. We had to process people in and out country. So when guys were coming into the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division, they'd come there and they'd have their paperwork and you'd have to make sure that their file had the correct destination, the orders are all in order, that we had the right guy going to the right place, and that kind of thing. And when they were going home, we were closing out their files and sending 'em home. So when they got to the States, it was just a simple process to get them out. So, we were cleaning up the paperwork. And it took a while to understand the impact of all the different forms and that kind of stuff. But it was not brain surgery. It was pretty easy to do. It was sad when... right before, I'd say, two months before I came home, we started processing in National Guard because they'd had so many losses that they activated National Guard to come to Vietnam. So all these guys who had been in forever — six, seven years, six years — went over as a group. They did not pick people out, they took units. So, I was literally processing people into Vietnam that had three weeks left of their duties. So they moved 'em all away as a unit from wherever they were in Georgia or whatever into Vietnam, and they had three weeks. And these guys, they had lives! I mean, they had wives, they had children, and they were going into combat. And I'd say, "Why are you doing this to these people?" I mean, this is, again, just part of the Army mystique that I could never swallow, I'm afraid. So, we did our best to try and hide those that had very little time left. Their orders got "lost, we had 'em staying with us in our hooches, I mean we buried 'em as best as we could. And by the time their paperwork came to light — lo and behold, it was time for them to go home. [both laugh].

Cohen: Wow! So you really tried to help people out.

Morgan: [Speaking at the same time] We were able to help. It was a very select few. I mean, there was still a lot of people coming over [that had] been in the [U.S. Army] Reserves for five years and they had another year to go and they were

gonna spend that year in Vietnam. And it's just hard to believe, I mean, it really is, but it was like the two years that I was there, '67 and '68, came very close to half of the deaths of the entire war — which was fifteen years basically — occurred in those two years. But I was so blissfully unaware of all this. I didn't see that. I mean, I saw the people that I was taking care of, I knew there were deaths occurring because of my orders that I was processing, but I never was in combat. I never saw these battles going on, and certainly the *Stars and Stripes* wasn't carrying on about all the casualties we were had or anything. So, our information was very limited.

Cohen: I think you mentioned that you had a subscription to the *Chicago Tribune* —

Morgan: Yes.

Cohen: — and other papers but it was...

Morgan: The *Tribune* was generally about three weeks late. So it was a little bit old news. I mean, there was still things we found there [static noises] that we never heard of anywhere else that was in there. But I mean for the most part... and I mean a lot of 'em never made it to me. I mean, I had one lady I never met... [who] gave me a free subscription to the *Tribune* and my parents sent me the *Tribune*, but I only got the Sunday versions and all the ads. I think, "You're sending these [laughs] all overseas?" [both laughs] And I got all these ads for buying a used car or the grocery store that's where you can buy apples for forty-seven cents a pound or whatever it was. I mean. [both laugh] You know, it became just kind of a joke more than anything else.

Cohen: Who was the woman who didn't know you who bought you a subscription?

Morgan: I guess in the States, a lot of people would be trying to help the troops over there. There were people writing letters to troops. I got one letter from, once, some woman that was just from a church group or whatever who was writing overseas to make sure I was okay.

Cohen: Trying to [Cohen laughs] improve the morale. [laughs]

Morgan: Yeah, right! Exactly. Exactly. I had no trouble with letters. I got a lot of letters. I found it really hard to start writing letters home because my experience... what I knew was going on is not the kind of stuff I wanted to tell Mom and Dad. You know. [laughs]

Cohen: Like they were worried enough as it was.

Morgan: Yeah. You really want to know how people were shot this week, or how many KIAs [killed in action] I processed. I mean, so I start making up stories: it was really nice, nothing really happens here and on and on and on and on and so. And not that it was that — I was never really in much... combat situations at all, very few... but I knew that it was going on. I mean, when you're guard duty, you could see the napalm being dropped out there and at night, you could see the tracers. They had a big plane that they put on these machine-driven machine guns and called 'em "Puff the Magic Dragon" and they would shoot down these tracers. You know, every fifth round was a tracer and you would just see a solid band of red coming down. This thing could put out a round in every square foot of a football field in a matter of a minute. I mean, and there was no place to hide. It's all coming straight down at you. I don't care where you're at... you're in trouble. [both laugh] So then, after Tet, they did move a huge canon on to our base camps, and they were firing this thing off. And it would sound like there was a... railroad train going over your head, I mean, just this huge sound going over. And sometimes, we'd never even hear the shell hit.

Cohen: Would you write anybody, like not your parents but like, I don't know, your brother or a friend, like would you write anybody as to what was going on?

Morgan: No. Not when I was over there. No. And a matter of fact, it was hard for me to keep making up stories, so I didn't write as frequently as I should and a couple of times I got notes from the captain, "Write home! [both laugh] Mom's a little upset, Jim. You haven't been writing her lately." "Okay, okay." [both] And a lot of guys had the same problem. A lot of guys, they just couldn't... keep up the façade, you know?

Cohen: [Softly] Yeah, yeah, like after a while, yeah.

Morgan: And like I say, it wasn't that bad. It's such a dichotomy of emotions that I have from it because... there was so little going on that I wasn't in jeopardy very, very much. A few times — it was enough for me — but I mean, [Cohen laughs] generally speaking, I was in a very safe, secure location. So... around me, not so much. [both laugh]

Cohen: [Softly] No, this is a dichotomy. Did you have any downtime or... what did you do when you weren't working or doing guard duty or other things?

Morgan: [Speaking at the same time] Well, generally speaking, there was not a whole lot of opportunities. I mean, they had a movie once or twice a week; they would take a bedsheet and staple it to the side of a hooch and take a movie. Most of it

is like TV shows like *Wild, Wild West*. I think I saw every episode they ever had of that. [both laugh, Morgan coughs]. And *Combat!* But nothing really too titillating, nothing too tragic. I mean, it was John Wayne was out there [and] he was gonna win the war. But I mean... it was all pretty basic stuff. I read a little bit. I had a couple of R&Rs while I was in country. They had an R&R location in country — rest and recreation — that was in Vũng Tàu. And it was like... in a coastal area, and it was just all very secure, and you could walk around in your civilian clothes, lay on the beach all day if you wanted to, drink beer, smoke, whatever. You were fine. Then I went to... Taiwan for — I guess it was six days, and that was fun. Went over there and bought a suit, a silk suit, which I never was able to fit into after I got home, but [laughs] it fit me then. [both laugh] And, you know, saw some of the sights. But basically, on the base camp, I've tried to think back and I can't remember how I killed time: playing cards, playing games with people, writing letters back home when I did get around to it. I did get a... reel-to-reel tape recorder and headphones, so I played a lot of tapes and listened to a lot of music. [coughs] Excuse me. And... nothing really stands out. I mean, we had a swimming pool on the base camp, but the pool was never kept up, so no one ever put their foot in there. [both laugh] And going to the PX, you'd go up there and you could buy some stuff to send home. And I did get off base a couple of times to go to a little town next to it — it was Thủ Đức — and they had a lot of dance halls, and bars, and a few gift shops, and the black market. The black market was fun to travel down. I mean, I never saw so many C-rations in my life until I got there. [both laugh] All the green peas and corn and they were stacks on these little carts. Yeah. It was all situated on the back of some kind of vehicle, a motorcycle or a small car or a truck, so they could go. If the MPs came by — they were gone. Everything disappeared. But they had tons and tons of stuff there. I remember I bought some Vietnamese cigarettes that I wanted to send home, just as a little goofy gift. They wouldn't let me do it because I found out, not knowing, that they had marijuana in them. [Cohen laughs] The local cigarettes. [both laugh] "Really? Now you tell me!" No. There was a lot of drug use that going on when I was overseas, but I was not into that culture. A friend of mine in the hooch I was in, he was [a] pretty heavy druggie. And one night I did share a joint with him. And it had white powder on it, and I had no idea what that was. He told me it was angel dust. I mean, I was stupid, okay. I had no idea. It was opium. [both laughs] So I laid in a little lounge chair behind our hooch and I watched the stars go in [a] circle for about four hours. [both laugh] I was just gone. [Cohen laughs] Then I walked into my hooch and someone's sleeping in my bed. So, I kicked 'em out and then went to bed. Next morning, I woke up in

somebody else's bed. [both laugh] And then I said, "I'm not doing that anymore. This could be dangerous to my health." [both laughs] I made my apologies and... but yeah. But there were a lot of guys who were just constantly drunk or high.

Cohen: Was this there way of coping?

Morgan: [Speaking at the same time] Right. Exactly. We had one guy — I don't know his name — he was a Native American and every Native American I ever knew when I was over there was called "Chief." That's all I ever heard 'em call 'em. There was no Jim, George, whatever. And he was an alcoholic's alcoholic. I mean, I don't know where he got it because hard stuff was very difficult to come up with, but I guess if you pay them money, you got what you wanted. And he walked into our hooch one night and he was just totally drunk. And we had like ten bunks on either side of the hooch in just a straight row, and he was walking through and he fell over every bunk. [Cohen laughs] Every one of 'em. He didn't miss one. [both laugh] Didn't drop the bottle, but he fell over everyone! He got to the end of the hooch and he finished the bottle. He started at one end and finished it at the other end and he passed out. I guess he was...

Cohen: [Unintelligible] put it in.

Morgan: I guess that wasn't his first bottle, either. I mean, why he was still alive, I don't know but... That stuff happened, but most people didn't do that. I mean, not that I saw. I mean, you'd have a couple of beers and everybody smoked cigarettes. I mean, you didn't go anywhere without a cigarette in your hand. [both laugh] It's a safety blanket, I mean... I don't know. Recreation over there... I just can't recall anything that I did. Nothing spectacular. I wasn't playing tennis. I wasn't [both laugh] playing basketball. I did throw a Frisbee back and forth for a while, but. [laughs]

Morgan: Did you like the people with whom you served?

Morgan: Yeah. Actually, I got along with everybody but for the most part, everybody kept to themselves. It was like there were not a whole lot of cliques of guys hanging out together and doing this and doing that that I saw. I mean, there might have but not from where I was or what I saw. I had friends, I mean, I had... a bunk that was over somebody else's bunk for the majority [of the] time I was there — or next to it — and I can't even tell you what his name is now. We were never really close. I mean, we were there, you know, we got along. We didn't do anything.

Cohen: It reminds me of the short story "For Esmé—With Love and Squalor" [by J.D. Salinger] where the narrator is fighting in World War II and describes being in a

group of introverts, for the most people would speak to each other was to ask to borrow a stamp [Morgan laughs] or stationary [laughs] to bring letters home, that kind [of thing].

Morgan: I'm sorry... I don't understand the question.

Cohen: Oh! Oh, no. I was just making a comment, it's kind of a tangential. That's okay.

Morgan: Okay.

Cohen: Sorry to get us —

Morgan: [speaking at the same time] No, that's okay!

Cohen: — off track. [laughs]

Morgan: Sometimes my focus kind of goes away. So, it could me more than you, trust me. [both laugh] So my wife tells me.

Cohen: [Speaking at the same time] Just to say that it sounds like it's not always easy to be part of a group and get along but may not be a close group. Like you say.

Morgan: [Speaking at the same time] No. The thing that I really would like to be able to do would be [to be] able to hold of the people that I did serve with over there. And I haven't figured out the vehicle to do that. I just joined another group, the Vietnam Veterans of America, with hopes that maybe they would have some means of getting a hold of everybody. But both the people I've talked to at the VVA and at the American Legion, all say, "The only people that really kept in contact with each other were those that were in combat." The people that were out in the field that had much tighter bonds. 'Cause in the office... you just didn't develop that. You didn't have that constant camaraderie, where you're living good and bad and everything else altogether at the same time. We didn't have that. So, the majority who were in support in the rear echelon... never really kept up with anybody. I had names and addresses when I came home. But I never used 'em and... somehow — they've all disappeared. I have no idea where any of that stuff is. I'd love to get a hold of some of these guys, just to give 'em a book [i.e., Morgan's memoirs, to] see, "What do you think? Do you remember it being like this?" [laughs]

Cohen: Yeah, that's true. Like how would they react to it?

Morgan: Yeah, exactly.

Cohen: Yeah, yeah.

Morgan: But so far, no luck.

Cohen: Maybe with social media, like looking at...

Morgan: Well, I've tried going through that. You know, I'm on Facebook only because of the book. I mean. The lady who set up my website [said], "You gotta get on Facebook!" "Okay. All right." So, I look at it once a month, you know. [both laughs] I mean, I don't really follow it. I don't contribute to it. I don't post anything on it. So that's not gonna work for me, I don't think. There are different organizations where you could try to get a hold of people. But again, it's all... um... people from the field. I mean, you've got artillery, you've got the infantry, you got people who were actually in to a lot of stuff together, and they were the ones that kept up with each other. I've yet to meet anybody I even went to basic training with. [laughs]

Cohen: Wow. [both laugh]

Morgan: Or anywhere else for that matter.

Cohen: Yeah. So... you're still in Vietnam, are there more things that you would like to talk about [from] Vietnam? Like, the impressions of the country or your health or...

Morgan: My health, well, I was pretty healthy most of the time over there. [I] take that back. I did have a real problem with a... cough. I developed a very bad cough. And I'm not sure from what caused it. I mean, I was over there and they were dropping Agent Orange to kill the foliage around the area. So, I don't know if I was really directly exposed to that or not. I know of people who were much closer to it that have some serious problems that I have met since. But over there, I didn't even know if I knew what Agent Orange was; I mean, if I knew if it was out there or what it was or anything, I don't even remember. But I developed this really terrible cough, and I kept going to the medics and they gave me more decongestions and whatever. Nothing helped the cough. And I was coughing so hard, I couldn't hold down a meal. And I was losing weight. I [was 6'2" tall and] only weighed 160 pounds when I got over there. I mean, I got really skinny after that. And finally, it ran its course for about, I guess, a couple of months and it went away. Of course, I never stopped smoking during this whole occasion. Smart like that. [both laugh] And I just took all these pills and every time they gave me a prescription, I had a locker — a wall locker and they had a shelf at the top — [and] I'd just push the old ones back and put the new ones in front. And we had an inspection one time when the MPs were looking for drugs



and they opened my locker and there were like eighty bottles [both laugh] on the shelf. So they came over to the office and took me away in handcuffs 'cause they thought they'd found a drug dealer of the company. "We got 'em now!" [both laugh]

Cohen: Little did they know!

Morgan: I said maybe you want to look at the bottles [and] who's names is on all those bottles. It was... painfully apparent to them very quickly that it was all just nothing. The kinds of drugs I had were not the drugs that people wanted. And it's all under my name. But... I had been home for quite a while — I got out in '68 — and I think [it was in 1981 that] **my** lung collapsed; my right lung collapsed. And they called it a spontaneous... pneumothorax — I'll get it out right — spontaneous pneumothorax and it's where the lung just collapses without trauma. Normally, [there is some kind of trauma and a rib] ruptures the sac around your lung, then fluid gets in and your lung collapses. Well, mine was collapsing with no trauma, and I spent three-and-a-half weeks in the hospital. Usually that type of event happens to an older teenager. Well, I was far from a teenager [both laugh] when this happened to me. And they thought it would just seal itself up, but it didn't. So, they finally had to operate, and I got like fifty-seven staples across the top of my lung holding it together! So far, so good. [Cohen laughs] They said, "The other one could go!" But that never happened. But it was quite a trauma... and I still don't know what caused it. It could have been Agent Orange. It could have been some virus. I mean, who knows? So yeah, that was my one big [medical adventure resulting from my being] overseas. [both laugh] [But when I had that cough back in 'Nam I seriously thought I] was not going to make it. I really did for a while. When I couldn't eat and hold down a meal I figured, "This is not good." Even I knew that. But like, you know, [I] just got lucky, got through it. And that was pretty much it. I had a filling fall out. That was the other incident. [both laugh] That was no big deal. [both laugh]

Cohen: So, I think you'd written that you had decided to extend your service?

Morgan: Well, they asked me to. [laughs]

Cohen: Oh. Okay. So what was it —?

Morgan: [Speaking at the same time] Well they asked everybody who was going home, and I felt really sorry for the enlistment officer because I can't imagine the amount of flak he got back from people who were going home and staying out of the Army. I had to [static noises] extend my service by forty-six days to get out

the Army five months early. At that time, if you came back from Vietnam with less than five months of active service duty left, they did not assign you to another post. You were able to go home, and there was no... reserve duty responsibilities. You were just out... they could call you back up for up to six years from the time you started. But, I mean, unless it was really a big deal, the odds are you were never going to be in the service again. So, I decided to extend my time by those forty-six days so I could get out of the service early. And then they asked me if I'm going home, that if I would like to extend my service. I said, "Are you kidding me? You want me to stay here another six months? [Cohen laughs] I stayed here for another forty-six days just so I wouldn't have to be [both laugh] in the Army anymore and especially not here!" So I went home and I was never unhappy about that.

Cohen: No, [laughs] no. What was it like seeing your family?

Morgan: Well, it was very, very... shocking for me. I mean, it was just like: wow. Everything is normal. It's like I've been to this nightmare of a country, basically, from my experience. And now, everything's okay. Anything I want, if I got the money in my pocket, I can get it. I don't have to worry about where I'm at or what I'm doing or where I'm going, and I don't have to worry about, you know, having a weapon with me or any [of] this other [stuff]. I mean it was just really very anti-climactic 'cause all of a sudden, one day you're in this situation [and] the next day, within twenty-four hours, you're in a different world. I mean, [an] entirely different world! I bought myself some jackets and a hat — you know, camouflage stuff — home that my mom washed in the hot water cycle about thirty times 'cause she could not get the smell out. I didn't know they had a smell. [both laughs] No idea!

Cohen: Probably smelled like that all the time.

Morgan: Well, they ended up maybe about half the size they started. [Cohen laughs] Nothing ever fit so that all went away. When I came home, the thing that I guess was most depressing for me was the reaction of the people at the airport. 'Cause everybody hated the soldiers — it seemed like — because everybody hated the war, everybody hated Vietnam. Vietnam was becoming a really big issue with anybody that was in school, anybody under thirty. And the most convenient target was the soldiers. As soon they are in uniform, you know this guy's a soldier. You know he was out there killing babies. You gotta tell him about it. Like I said, eighty percent of the people are in support, and they're being blamed for all this trauma that they had no connection with. I mean, there's a lot of people

that never went overseas, and everybody was taking these hits for being... monsters. And you're bad, and how could you do that? And I had people spitting at me at the airport.

Cohen: Wow.

Morgan: I mean one of 'em, I went after, my family had to hold me down. And then you get home and you think, "Well, okay. No one's gonna know now." [Of] course, you're suntanned and it's in November. [laughs] You got real short hair. [both laugh] People seemed to figure it out, I don't know. [laughs]

Cohen: So that's just maybe unlike the other wars were, where the veterans were celebrated here, like you're saying--

Morgan: [Speaking at the same time] Yeah. There was no celebration. I mean, the Army, it was lucky if they said, "Thank you for your service." Once you were done, they were moving on to the next batch. They had people they needed to get going over. There was very little... acceptance or reward for your efforts. I mean, I was able to go back to school with, you know, the G.I. Bill and whatever. But it never really benefited me all that much. I don't know. It's really hard to describe, I guess. I mean it was —

Cohen: Like it added more, let's say, troubles than advantages.

Morgan: [Speaking at the same time] Right. Well, you know, I never considered myself some kind of villain. And you come back and everybody's blaming you for everything that's going on. And it wasn't the soldiers that were doing all this stuff. They didn't go out there to decide to go into this village and shoot people. I mean, they were told to go into this village and shoot people. I mean... the only person that I know — that I dedicated the book to — that died in Vietnam was my drill sergeant from basic training. I saw him when he came into the country, but he didn't have any insignia on. Mostly people didn't wear patches on their shoulders or whatever for their rank. They'd wear little metal, punched-out little insignias saying you were a sergeant or lieutenant or whatever. So it was very hard at any distance to see who were the leaders, the whole idea being that snipers would not have a definitive target. And I saw him, and he didn't have any insignia on at all and he had just come in the country. And I was amazed! I mean, here I am, I've been there for six months and now he's coming over. I says, "You must have done something really wrong to be here." [both laugh] And he smiled and he walked on, and I checked 'cause I really wanted to know. I had my... two books from basic training and from AIT of the people that I served with. And I

had the names, so I went through the names of the people — especially the ones that were in my squad when I was at AIT — to see if their names were on the Vietnam [Veterans Memorial] Wall ‘cause there was a website you can go to. And none of them were there. And I was just, “Wow. Is that wonderful.” I mean, seriously.

Cohen: Oh really. That’s a relief.

Morgan: And I start checking some of the other names and I found out that my drill sergeant had been killed over there. Now, he had gone over as a second lieutenant. A second lieutenant in Vietnam was a bad job ‘cause you were squad leader or a group leader and you’d be the one telling ‘em to take the hill, and you got all these kids who don’t want to be shot and they all got weapons. So there was a lot of fragging, there were a lot of our soldiers that were killed by other soldiers that just didn’t want to go up that hill. They just didn’t want to die. They’d watch two people go up and get shot. “I’m not doing that.” And it’s a sad mentality but it did happen with a certain amount of frequency. A lot of second lieutenants had very tough jobs and a lot of ‘em didn’t make it. So, it’s another reason not to go to OCS as far as I’m concerned. [both laugh] I knew that it was a tough job, but I never really realized until I started reading up on it a little bit. It was tough. It’s not that every one of ‘em had that kind of a situation but those that were in combat...

Cohen: [Softly] To deal with all the reluctant soldiers--

Morgan: Yeah. And then you’re telling someone to go out there and, you know, put yourself really into a desperate situation. It’s tough. It’s very tough. And everybody’s got hand grenades, everybody’s got weapons. And that was the scariest thing about to me about over there. I was more worried about our own soldiers a lot of the time than I was about anything else. Everybody had a weapon! [both laugh] Some guy gets angry, [laughs] he could do some damage. I mean, I had... M14 and then the M16 plus I had five... what do you call it... whatever it is. The thing that goes into the weapon that holds the cartridges (a magazine)... I had a hundred rounds of ammunition with me at all times. I mean, I didn’t use them! [both laugh] But yeah, somebody could definitely do a lot [of damage] — I know of only one guy. When I was doing mail call, one of the guys [that I gave the mail to] got a Dear John letter. And he went nuts. You know, his girlfriend, whatever, had left him and go on with some guy going to Canada or whatever. And... he went back to his hooch and he jumped on to the top of bunk of a double set of beds and started putting holes in the roof with his gun. And,

you know, scared everybody to death. They had the building surrounded and they kept yelling at him to come out and he says, "Anybody comes through the door, I'm gonna shoot them." He was just distraught. He was totally gone. So after a couple of hours, the company commander called a sniper to come in and take him down because you just can't have a guy shooting people. So, they tied a rope on the door so they could open the door and the sniper was out there in a position to fire at him. And the guy in the bed turned his rifle towards the guy and they shot him. They shot him in the shoulder. But it also hit his rifle and the shrapnel went into his neck and got the carotid [artery]. So he was gone very, very quickly. I knew who they guy was. I didn't know the guy at all. I mean, we had five hundred people at our base camp. I gave him this letter. I mean, I'm complicit to some small degree. It's all her fault, but that's beside the point. [Cohen laughs] No, but I mean it's sad.

Cohen: [speaking at the same time] This is painful and right, you said the people are upset and they had this ammunition on them. Anything can happen.

Morgan: [Speaking at the same] Yeah. Yeah. I mean, there was only two people killed in our company when I was over there that I know of. And another one was a guy who was going home, 'bout the same time I was. And we had a mortar attack one night and he decided to try to run to the bunker, and when you're hit with mortars, the best thing you can do — at least it was then — is hit the ground. And make yourself as low profile as possible. You could be very close to a mortar exploding because it goes up at an angle. You probably will survive, unless if you're really close to it then forget about it. And he got caught by shrapnel from a mortar and [it] killed him. Running to a bunker. If he had stayed where he was and laid down, he'd be alive. But he just panicked, you know, and when I got short, when I had less than a month to go, you get really weird. I mean, you get bitchy and angry and scared and... I had to talk myself down. I mean, I was just like getting so uptight and tense and everything. The shorter you are, the more sure you are something bad is gonna happen and you're not gonna get outta there.

Cohen: Oh, you're afraid like it'll be ruined.

Morgan: Yeah. "It's too good to be true. I knew it's not gonna happen." You know, that kind of thing. I made it home. And here I am, still semi-normal. [both laugh]

Cohen: You know, looks pretty normal to me. You know. [both laugh] So what did you do after you went back home? Did you say you went back to school after that?

Morgan: Well, I started to go back to school. I was never a student. I know that I had the smarts to do so, the Army told me with all those tests, but I never really applied myself. I wish I could [have] had the time -- I'm sure that's something everybody says -- to do it again? I would've, certainly. My life story would be entirely different, but I didn't. I was lucky enough to work and to start with a company... I was able to get into sales, and I liked dealing with people and talking. The first thing in sales was to sell yourself, and I was pretty good about that. So, I was pretty successful for a long time. I mean, not rich by any stretch of the imagination but comfortable, you know. So, it's okay. But if I had an education, and I'd really done something with my life, I could've gone a lot further. I know I could've, but I just never wanted to. I just didn't get that gene or that incentive or whatever. I don't know.

Cohen: Well, it sounds like you enjoyed what you did and it supported everybody. So, it worked well. [both laugh]

Morgan: It worked out. Yes, it did. [Cohen laughs] You always got to make your own way, and I was very fortunate... [there was a little] luck, [but most of it was just] hard work. You know, you just keep going at it. I never thought I'd be a salesman. I was more of an introvert than anything else most of my life. And I have to go out and talk to people? Are you kidding? [both laugh] But it worked. Like I said, I liked dealing with people one-on-one. Once I felt that everybody is just a human being, you're just gonna talk to 'em. Yeah, it worked out. [both laugh]

Cohen: Did you have any children?

Morgan: Well, I got one daughter from my first marriage and I've got a step-daughter from my second. First marriage lasted seven years to the day. I mean, I was married on the third and the divorce papers were on the same month over on the second. So, it was [both laugh] seven years to the day! And... we had an agreeable divorce, if you will. Such as it is. And then I have a step-daughter from my second marriage. And my wife and I have now been married — it'll be thirty-eight years in September. So, I got it right. Little better job at it the second time around. [both laugh] A little practice. Keep working at it. [both laugh] It's amazing, though, because I tell you, the second marriage was much more difficult than the first because you got this extra baggage. We each got an ex, you got another kid. It takes a while to make it work but it was always a team effort, so it did work out. And it was more difficult for her because I was in sales, I was traveling all the time. So, she was the one stuck with the responsibilities at home. So... God bless her. [both laughs] I still tell her. [both laugh]

Cohen: Is there anything you'd like to talk about that's in the photo album right now? Or show or —?

[Morgan and Cohen are looking at Morgan's photo album.]

Morgan: [Speaking at the same time] Well, I don't know. I mean, I don't know if you can see it with the glare up the cover or not, but this is me pretty much from time I got to the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division and this is maybe a couple of weeks before I went home, a month before I went home, maybe.

Cohen: [Softly] Oh boy. You do look very skinny here.

Morgan: [Speaking at the same time] Oh, yeah. That's me. I'm very skinny... and... I'm trying to figure which one is here from upside down. I'm here somewhere on it — oh, that's me.

Cohen: Okay wait, in front, yeah. Yeah!

Morgan: So, I've got pictures here of what it was like in Dĩ An.

Cohen: I assume you had a camera with you?

Morgan: Yeah. Well, I got a little one. I mean, I was never a big camera nut but, I didn't have a Canon or anything like that. I had a little... 35mm, but it was just a self-contained thing. And... it took okay pictures. I took a lot more slides than pictures because it was cheaper to get 'em developed. But I mean this is just where I was at in Dĩ An. And... we had a company monkey! It was important.

Cohen: [Softly] This monkey. Yeah.

Morgan: [Laughs] Yeah. [Cohen laughs] Yeah, it was a lot of pounds ago... I don't know. There's nothing really outstanding in these pictures. They're just a little bit of memory.

Cohen: You see also I think some of the women who you mentioned before that did some of the landscape work over here.

Morgan: Yeah. These are [the] little girls. Their little conical hats and everybody wore black pajamas — silk pajamas. It was their mainstay. I mean, they had different colored tops on but they all had those pajama pants on... Yup! Those were the days. There I am in mail call.

Cohen: Oh [laughs] okay. [both laugh]

Morgan: Come Christmas time, it was a lot more [laughs] heavy... This is the inside of the bunker with the machine guns and that kind of stuff. All the pictures I had probably told the enemy everything they wanted to know about what our defensives were like. [both laugh] Never thought about that at the time.

Cohen: [Laughs] But it didn't sound like there was any censorship of film?

Morgan: [Speaking at the same time] Not really. I mean, I don't know if anybody's letters were censored or not. They didn't have time for that. This is the stuff I got sent from home. Cakes and... yeah, and... coffee and whatever else. I can't remember all the stuff that we got sent. My mom sent me a birthday cake once, and I got it at the office. It was in this tin that was sealed with fiber tape and it was wrapped and foiled. A German chocolate cake — it was just wonderful! I set it up on top of my... file cabinet and at the end of the day I was going to take it back and have couple of pieces. And ants had gotten in through the tape and they'd [both laugh] completely decimated the cake.

Cohen: Aww! [both laugh]

Morgan: I hated fire ants. [both laugh] That's some of the PX things that we had... They had a barber shop there that was very cool. "The Kansas Laundry," my dad always liked that.

Cohen: Oh, okay. [Morgan laughs] From Kansas, he liked [laughs] "The Kansas Laundry."

Morgan: Yeah. These are the local Vietnamese. These are the girls like more from our office. They wore the nicer outfits... Let's see. I don't know. Here's me listening to my tape recorder, something I often did. This is Saigon after Tet, when I went there [on] that one run.

Cohen: Okay. That's when things became a bit quieter?

Morgan: Yeah. [The damaged buildings are really faded in these pictures.] I'm looking at 'em here [but I don't remember which ones they were].

Cohen: But still that's neat, you have a sense of the —

Morgan: [Speaking at the same time] Yeah. I got something there. I did have to get to be an E4 [Specialist] to become a finance clerk and that happened probably four months after I was in-country. I passed the exam earlier, but they only had so many allocations, so they had to wait 'til they could give me the thing and then I became a real finance clerk. [both laugh] And then two months later, I qualified



for E5 'cause I didn't like guard duty and I didn't like doing KPs. So, if you're an E5, you didn't have to do that.

Cohen: Did you have more [or] other responsibilities?

Morgan: Yeah. You'd have CQ and you'd have a few other things, but it was like the payback was much better. [both laugh] There was a little bit of a pay increase, but that was never the incentive. It was just to get out of all these other stupid duties. And even though I qualified for it, it took 'em six months to give it to me. I mean, I was promoted to E5 like maybe three weeks before I went home – well into my extension! [Cohen laughs] If I hadn't extended the forty-six days, I never would have made it. And then, they offered me E6 [Staff Sergeant] if I'd stay later. [both laugh] I said, "No, thanks anyways." That's me when I came home! And these were the leaflets that they were dropping that I told you about. It was called the Chiêu Hồi Program.

Cohen: [Speaking at the same time] Yeah. I've heard about this. So, they encouraged the North Vietnamese to...

Morgan: The North Vietnamese, the Vietnamese [the VC, Viet Cong]. And they would have little sayings on 'em and they'd tell 'em how their mothers were worried about 'em and how much better we'll take care of 'em. We'll feed them, we'll take care of their families, we'll give 'em money. Just turn yourself in and stop shooting at us. And then these were dropped on our base camp all the time just because of the wind shifting. They were trying to get to the enemy, but they got to us instead.

Cohen: [Speaking at the same time] There's a lot of them...

Morgan: [Speaking at the same time] Oh yeah, there's a lot of 'em.

Cohen: So varied and so many.

Morgan: Well, they would take the same [theme], the same picture and they would just lay it out a little differently. [This one is showing how a] Mom's thinking about her dead son and you don't want to be that dead son [Cohen laughs] do you? Give yourself up, come on! What are you thinking? [both laugh] And this was the military payment currency. This was what was there when I first got there and then we changed it over to that later on. I'd never seen change — a bill for five cents or ten cents. [Cohen laughs] I mean, there's no big denominations per say. But I used to have five dollar[s]. I think twenty dollars was the biggest denomination that they did. And then this is the local Vietnamese money here.

Cohen: Okay, over here.

Morgan: Well yeah, that's Vietnamese. And then this. And then the đồng [Vietnamese currency]... Oh, this is it though. Someone gave me this, but I can't remember what this is. These are the change from the Vietnamese money. This is... I can't even read it! Someone gave me — oh! Re-create -- I give up. If I could only read again. Some kind of challenge coin... I forget. But if you wanted some of this for your library or... archives, you're more than welcome to it. I mean, I've had it for a long time. I don't need it. [laughs]

Cohen: Well, think it over. [laughs] But if you would like to donate it.<sup>2</sup>

Morgan: Sure.

[Morgan and Cohen stopped looking at Morgan's photo album]

Cohen: We'd thank you very much.

Morgan: No problem.

Cohen: Yeah. [I'll] call the head of collections and see.

Morgan: Okay.

Cohen: Yeah. Just reminds me, looking at the currency — it's not connected directly — but... were you given any awards or medals?

Morgan: Well, because of the action on that perimeter sweep, I did get a Bronze Star. But it wasn't directly for the Bronze Star because it was never reported as being a military action... 'cause my sergeant was afraid I would get in trouble for firing in a zone that we weren't supposed to fire in. He was just so paranoid about the fact that we were not supposed to fire our weapons out there. I guess they really had drilled it into his head that, "Nobody is to shoot their weapon!" Didn't tell the guys on the other side of the fence! But so, he was upset about that, but then he put me up for the Bronze Star for being a good clerk. And I was an okay clerk. I was not the best clerk that they had by any stretch of the imagination. I don't know if anybody else got put up for a Bronze Star or not. I didn't realize I had then. He never said anything to me. But I was going through my orders and things before coming home — I was putting a folder together so I could hand people the stuff they needed when I got to the plane and got back to the States. [And one was an order recommending me for a Bronze Star, and I had no idea

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<sup>2</sup> Morgan subsequently donated Chu Hoi leaflets, US scrip [paper money issued for temporary use] and Vietnamese money to PMML.

that was coming.] And I asked around, [but no one knew if it was a done deal or just a recommendation.] So being on a base camp and, you know, a company that dealt with this, I went to the awards building and I showed it to the clerk behind the counter. He says, "Oh! You're getting a Bronze Star!" I said, "Well, it just says I'm nominated for it." "Oh, you got it!" [both laugh] Pulls a piece of paper out, stamps a couple of names on it, takes another pen [and follows the stamped signature so it looks real]. [both laugh] And then gives me a case, puts that all in a nice little binder type of thing, and then gives me the medal in a little cabinet and say[s], "Here you go." It was the most, probably, uncelebrated [laughs] award. [laughs]

Cohen: Award. You're right. No pomp and circumstance. [laughs]

Morgan: "Have a good day." [both laugh] "Really? Really, this is it?"

Cohen: So, you think it was like the sergeant's way of thanking you?

Morgan: Yeah. Exactly. I went back to him and I thanked him. I said, "I don't know what I did to deserve this." "Oh! You really helped a lot with everything." I said, "I know. Thank you very much, I appreciate it." And we just shook hands and that was it. [softly] I mean. But I had no idea, and I never really... celebrated that fact 'cause I never really felt that I had earned it very much. You know, I mean, fine, I was there, and I did something but — [coughs] excuse me — I didn't think I had saved the squad or anything like that.

Cohen: Well, maybe you had. I mean.

Morgan: Well, I was the first guy to get shot at. No one else fired that whole time when we were on that perimeter sweep. I was the only one that fired 'cause he's yelling at everybody not to fire and they're all just... [both laugh] You know? You know, he's threatening me with a court martial for disobeying a direct order under fire — which is a hanging offense, actually. I mean. [both laugh] But it never came to that. I never really thought of that as being a circumstance. If it had happened, I'd have been very surprise, but it could've, I guess. Again, it was just one of those bizarre, out-of-body, weird experiences. There's no way to really...

Cohen: Convey it?

Morgan: You know, to understand it. I mean, it's just like this guy is upset about returning fire in an area where you're getting shot at. That shouldn't be your primary concern. [both laugh] Primary concern should be taking care of those guys

that're shooting at you, but no. [Cohen laughs] But they scattered pretty quick 'cause they knew we were on a base camp. So. So how much jeopardy we were [in] — all I know is that I had bullets going over my head. [both laugh] I said, "That was enough for me. I don't like those bullet sounds by the ears." You know, it's an indication that something could have gone wrong. [laughs]

Cohen: Sounds like you need to take a stand. [both laugh]

Morgan: Yeah. Exactly.

Cohen: So, are there any questions that I did not ask that you would like to be asked? Is there something you'd [phone ringing] like to talk about?

Morgan: Oh! You know, I'm sure there is. I just can't think of anything... I'm sorry, I should've turned my phone off. I will, momentarily. Here you go. I don't know... so many things happened over there — I think I pretty much have covered everything, but I'm pretty sure I missed something along the line... Again, I guess, I'd like to restate the fact that the reason I wrote the book to begin with was to tell my story for the family. But then it became an effort to really talk about the war and hopefully get drilled in through somebody's head that there's no way to win a war. There's no winners. I mean, no matter who gets the victory. I mean, technically, Vietnam won the war — the North Vietnamese. And what did they win? They were in poverty for how many generations, I mean. One of the biggest things I think I need to mention which has been driven home to me lately with this Vietnam Veterans of America is the impact of Agent Orange. Everybody thinks Agent Orange is history. It is not history. It is in the ground water and it is in the ground of Vietnam as we speak. It's got, they tell me, a lifetime of five more generations. So that's about a hundred years. And maybe more. So, if you buy a can of tuna and you turn it over and it says product of Vietnam, it could have Agent Orange in it. And Agent Orange is a terrible poison. There was not just Agent Orange, there was black, there was purple, there was pink, blue, whatever color you could think of. It's different defoliants but they all had terrible ramifications. This thing with my lung could be that, I don't know. A lot of people have respiratory problems from over there. So, you gotta be careful. I caution everybody that I know not to... have or to... consume anything from Vietnam. And that pretty much covers Southeast Asia, it's not just Vietnam because Cambodia they dropped it on, Laos, probably Thailand, I mean, a lot of that part of the country. I mean, I'm not trying to ruin anybody's industry. But I mean, you got to think about what you're doing. I've watched some travel shows where guys are eating food from street vendors in Vietnam and I'm thinking,

“You’re nuts!” [both laugh] I mean, I could pass it on to my daughter. She could pass it on to her children, they could pass it on to somebody else for five generations! I mean, they would have no idea where this poison was coming from. I mean, I don’t know. My daughter has trouble with asthma. Her kids have trouble with some things. So, it might be an effect of this — I have no idea of knowing. And it’s sad but you gotta be a little concerned about that, and I don’t know how you stop it. I mean, there’s probably dozens of, if not more, you know, Vietnamese restaurants in Chicago that get their products from Vietnam. I’m not sure it’s not a good idea to go eat there! That’s all I can say about it. [laughs] I know I won’t. I’m not a big fan of Vietnamese food, anyways. I like Chinese food and I like Thailand... but — eh.

Cohen: So, I hear what you’re saying [about] like the long effects of war, some of which you never dreamed of, you know.

Morgan: Right. It’s very hard to understand the total ramifications, but I’m sure they’re gonna be going on for a while. I did file with the government for a claim when I was in the hospital with my lung and they told me, “It was not Agent Orange. You don’t know what you’re talking about.” [both laugh] So, I guess it wasn’t Agent Orange, they told me. [laughs] And as far as anything else that went on in Vietnam, I can’t think of anything. I mean, I covered everything in the book that I wanted to say. Like I said, it did take me five years to write it because I just kept changing my perspective on things and I would remember something else that happened, you know. “Oh yeah, I did this. Oh yeah, what about that? And this guy said this.” And whatever, so. But I think I pretty well told everything. I’m not sure it’s a good book or not. I consider it, hopefully, somewhat of a reference.

Cohen: [Speaking at the same time] No. No. It’s very good. Yeah.

Morgan: The... glossary in the back of the book —

Cohen: [speaking at the same time] Yeah. Very helpful, actually.

Morgan: — I spent a lot of time on that, going to different sites and seeing what people have said, because it’s almost a story in itself. If you read through the glossary, you’d get enough impact of... what these words actually meant. And the one that bothers me the most that’s in that is a saying [laughs] called “tits up,” which means you’re dead. You’re lying on your back, chest is up. And I don’t know, for some reason that just grabbed me when I typed that. I mean, there’s lots of other terrible things in there. A lot of... bad words.

Cohen: You know, well, it’s a sad one.

Morgan: Oh yeah. Speaking of bad words, we all swore like sailors when we were in Vietnam, I mean. The F word was certainly the most popular one and it was in the middle of words, it was in every sentence. You talked to a chaplain, he'd be using the F word in for you. All the officers, everybody talked like that. So, when I came home, it was a big transition that not be swearing all the time. [Cohen laughs] You know, 'cause it was just the way we talked. I mean, that's what you said. I remember my mother and father had the whole family over and friends and big spread of food up there and I asked them to pass the effing potatoes, you know. [both laugh]

Cohen: Because it's normal. [Laughter]

Morgan: And I was so embarrassed. I mean, I got up and left. I just couldn't believe I said that. [both laugh] But, you know, [I] never said that before when I was at home! [both laugh]

Cohen: So... do you have like... one message or one main message for future generations?

Morgan: Well, like I said, the biggest thing is that we can avoid any armed conflict because there's no resolution. It doesn't solve anything to go out there. And you may seem justified: maybe you need their resources, maybe you're going in retaliation for something they've done to you. There's got to be a more peaceful way to resolve things because it doesn't resolve anything. As soon as you go out there and hurt somebody else, that's gonna come back at you somewhere. And it doesn't have to be done with shots, it could be done with, you know, legislation or just, you know, not dealing with it. I'm not smart enough to know what the real remedies of the world are. But it just is... a terrible choice to make. But, I mean, it's been going on for as long as man's been able to find a rock. I mean. [laughs] There's always conflict and it's always gonna be conflict. People feel... cheated or they say you need something, but it doesn't do any good. But I don't know what's gonna stop that from happening.

Cohen: Oh, well, it's [a] big question. Yeah, yeah.

Morgan: [Speaking at the same time] Yes, yeah. People think well, we'll stop making guns. Well, there's enough guns out there to outlast [both laugh] thirty or forty more generations of people. You're never gonna get rid of all the guns. Whether you sell 'em or not... or stop making 'em or not. Stop making ammunition? Well, yeah, ammunition's got a lifetime, that's probably true, but there's still gonna be someone out there putting it together. So, I don't think you could stop it. I don't

know. The basic thing is to just [to] try not to get yourself into these circumstances. I mean, [President Donald] Trump is meeting right now [with North Korea]. If they can get that resolved, that would be a tremendous thing because, I mean, you've got this terrible enemy that's twenty-five miles away from South Korea with... [a] city of how millions of people. I mean, it's like... what's it gonna do? I mean, you drop bombs on 'em, what do you accomplish?

Cohen: [Softly] Accomplish, right.

Morgan: So hopefully, that won't happen. We'll see. [Cohen laughs] I'll hope. [both laugh]

Cohen: Well, on behalf of the Pritzker Military Museum & Library, I'd like to thank you for your service and for the interview. We appreciate it.

Morgan: Well, thank you very much.

## **Addendum**

Since the time of the original interview, Neal Morgan has, unfortunately, been diagnosed with multiple myeloma, one of diseases that the VA has recognized as a result of Agent Orange exposure during the Vietnam War. He is currently in remission. Per Morgan, those interested can check his website: <https://www.shot-at-vietnam.com/> for additional information. Leah Cohen, 06-05-2020