

Theodore “Ted” Acheson

Part 1

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Interviewed by Thomas Webb

Transcribed by Unknown

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Webb: Okay, and we are live. We always like to kind of start these things by introducing both of the speakers. So I would say my name is Thomas Webb, and I am calling from the Pritzker Military Museum and Library, and today is August 22nd, 2015, and I am talking to Theodore Acheson. Ted? If that's okay.

Acheson: That's fine, yeah.

Webb: How are you doing today?

Acheson: I am doing really good, it's a beautiful, blue sky day, here in outside of Austin, Texas.

Webb: Austin, Texas, okay. We like to begin these oral histories with kind of a little bit of a background. Although the focus is on the military experiences, we like to know a little bit about the person leading up to their military service. So I would just ask you when and where you were born?

Acheson: I was born in Flint, Michigan, November 15th, 1945.

Webb: And what was it like growing up in Flint, Michigan?

Acheson: Flint, Michigan, was a very rough town. It was not a very sophisticated place, although, most of the blue collar people that lived there made a very good living working in the— mostly GM [General Motors] factories that were around there. It was a definitely a blue collar town. They tried to add some, some sophistication to it by bringing in a college and cultural center that C.S. Mott put together but it was not used very frequently.

Webb: Okay, and what did your parents do in Flint, Michigan?

Acheson: Well, my dad at one time owned a bar, and my mom was a, she was a reporter for *The Flint Journal*. Flint, at the time when I was growing up, was the second largest city in Michigan, and then sometimes Grand Rapids took that spot over, it was kind of like back and forth. And it was a fairly large city then with all the blue collar workers that work for General Motors, but as you know, and most people know, GM shut down most of the factories and shuttered them in Flint.

Webb: Yeah, that seems to have been a major problem for the whole state of Michigan. But I know that Flint was especially hard hit by that.

Acheson: Yeah, so I hope that answers those questions, go ahead.

Webb: Would you say typical upbringing?

Acheson: Yeah, yeah, I mean, growing up I, you know, it was a middle-class neighborhood and some upper-class people in the school system. For Christmas, I got a couple of toys, and I was very happy to get the one or two toys I got. I didn't know other people got what they got until later in life, and it was pretty amazing, but I was always happy with what my parents or grandparents could purchase for me.

Webb: And from the research that we've done, I know that you ultimately ended up at college. Was that always kind of a goal of yours? You know, that was still kind of an era where maybe not everybody did go to college like it's pushed these days. And being a blue collar community, did you always think that you'd go to college? Or how did that work?

Acheson: Well, even as a poor student in high school, I don't mean financially poor, a lousy student in high school, I still wanted to go to a college, and I did have some ability in the arts, and I had a great ability in literature and also in history. And those areas I really blossomed in and I actually ended up going to a school called Latin School of Art in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. And it was in some type of agreement with Marquette University. So Marquette—we would take our core classes: English, psychology, et cetera. And all the art classes were at Layton. So any students at Marquette that wanted to take art classes took them through Layton. So they had this mutual agreement so that where I went, started in college. I was the first one in both sets of parents that had gone to college at that point. And so, anyway. My parents were... they could not afford to send me to college, I had to pay my own way through. So I had great summer jobs, I mean, I worked mostly construction work. In one summer, I think my—going into my sophomore year—I worked as a sanitary engineer at, what was known then as AC, Sparkplug. You know what a sanitary engineer is?

Webb: Well, I have some guesses, but why don't you go ahead.

Acheson: Well, sanitary engineer was somebody who cleaned bathrooms. And so I had about six or seven bathrooms to clean a day, and, hey, I got a very, paid for my, paid for the whole year. College and also my room and board so I couldn't complain.

Webb: You've mentioned you were always kind of interested in art, and then perused that then in college. Was that something that you had any kind of formal training, lessons as a child, or maybe had a grade school that helped kind of build on that talent or interest?

Acheson: Well, I mentioned that college and cultural center, and one of the things they did on Saturdays was have art classes. And I was probably in sixth or seventh grade when I

would go. And I would go to those classes all school year long. I would go down there and study, but, you know, it helped formulate my ideas.

Webb: Yeah, I would imagine that you got some training or at least some knowledge and perspective and some of the things that would help you later on.

Acheson: Absolutely. Yeah, design—light and dark—understanding how light falls, and perspective, and that type of thing was just invaluable and I never knew it at the time how it was gonna be. But it turned out to help me a lot in my life.

Webb: Well, thinking about college—and especially college in the sixties did—what was going on in the world -- really register with you at that time. Did you know that there was this kind of ongoing conflict in that particular area that you would find yourself in. Or, you know, what was going on in the sixties as you kind of entered into college?

Acheson: Well, I remembered my freshman year, the Gulf of Tonkin incident. I remember watching something of that in kind of like a day room in a dormitory I was in. And even in high school, I remembered that Kennedy was sending advisors to Vietnam. I read a lot. I read the paper every morning. I got senior scholastics once a week. We had a pretty good civics program, a good history teacher, and kind of kept us up on what was going on in Asia. But as far as really understanding that, I probably didn't start to understand it until maybe my freshman year of college.

Webb: There are a couple of questions I have about that, and I'll backtrack maybe just a little bit. You know, someone of my age group, and I'm thirty-five, maybe doesn't fully understand the draft or how the draft came in to being around the era of Vietnam. As you were leaving high school, the draft had not yet gone into place, is my...

Acheson: Not true, not true. No, there was always, the draft had always been available for the government to use from World War II on. When you turned eighteen, you had to go and register, I mean, it was the law. You had to register for the draft, even if there was not a conflict going on, you still registered for the draft. No one was really drafted, it wasn't a—it certainly wasn't a big deal when I first attended college in 1964. In 1964 was when I believe the Gulf of Tonkin incident happened. And we started building up our Special Forces, and then we moved in the Marines. I think that was early '65, if I'm not mistaken, might have been early '64, I don't have that in front of me right now. Anyway, the draft was still, still started the draft up at that point, and my junior year, I started my junior year and that summer of '66 they kept moving my draft status because I was a college student and we got deferments. And if you were married, you got deferments. And if you were married with a child, you got a deferment. So, the first ones to use that deferment were the students and mine kept going back. 1A was draft eligible. 2S was a student. Well, that kept moving back and forth that summer. I mean, I would get maybe once every five weeks a new status. So I went off to college and started, I had a 2s. And I wasn't going to be drafted. Well, October, it changed to 1A and then in November, it

said "Greetings and Salutations" and report to this place. And so I reported there and at that point in time they gave me an opportunity to take another year and pick a col... not a college, but a school to go to. And so I went and talked to a recruiter that was at, I think it was Fort Wayne, Detroit. And I was talking about photography. And, so anyway he said, "Well, there's two photography, several photography things. You can be a lab tech, you can work motion picture photography, and you can be a still photographer." So I said, "Well, okay," I asked if there was any Army illustrators. He said, "What?" And so we looked and there were. And I said, "Okay, my first choice is to be an Army illustrator." He said, "I never even heard of that." And he was, was one of the guys that that's his job to know all of this. Well, anyway, I took—put down Army still photographer second. And the one I really wanted was Army motion picture photographer and they put that third. And so as it turned out, I was able, I didn't know which one of those I was going to get until I got, actually, at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, to start basic training. And then they told me because otherwise if you, if they didn't provide one of those three schools within a very certain amount of time, you were free to go on and become a civilian again.

Webb: Oh really?

Acheson: So, yeah. So anyway, I said that's great, fine. So I was, I got the one I really intended to have to begin with. And they let me finish my junior year, that semester of my junior year. I had to report on, in January 3rd, 1967.

Webb: Okay, I do have one question that I would like to ask you about. Colleges in the sixties, and specifically Midwest colleges, you know, as we look back in history a lot of times universities, academia, is considered where the counter culture might have started. You know, that kind of "against the man" mentality. And I kind of, I don't know if that was more of a coast kind of phenomenon. I just wondered if you could describe what the atmosphere was like at Layton/Marquette.

Acheson: Okay, at that point in time it hadn't, the anti-war movement in that area really hadn't started to build a great deal. My—I recall some of the upper classmen starting to rebel against certain things. I'll give you, maybe, an example. They started growing their hair long like *The Beatles*. They started dressing funky, and that kind of moved on down to, you know, to upperclassmen down. And, of course, they were playing Bob Dylan, and again, more of that happened as I moved up from a freshman to a sophomore to a junior. In my... going into my junior year, I believe a lot more was started to happen. And when I got to college I was aware of it. I wasn't aware of it when I was working construction that summer so much. I do believe that most of it started on the, you know, with Ivy League Schools and the schools out in California, Berkley, and Madison, Wisconsin, was a real hot-bed. I, at that point in time, I came from... My father was in World War II, my grandfather was in France during World War I, and my dad's brother was in Guadalcanal, and my uncle served in Korea. So I kind of—a family that was pretty

traditional in their beliefs. And so my belief at the time was that we were probably doing the right thing. And I use the word, “probably”. You understand, I just said probably, that’s it.

Webb: Well, I'm sure that will come back up as we get further in the interview. How about some of your classmates, were they facing the same kind of—dilemmas not the right word—but getting the same notices, having the same options of looking at different ways of entering the military?

Acheson: At that point in time, everybody was looking at what was going on. In 1966, that summer, you could do, there were two things that would help you avoid the draft. One, you could take -- if you were in college. One if you took this standardized test and you were able to pass it at a certain level, then your deferment continued. The other thing was having a 3.2 grade point average. Excuse me, what was it. You had to be in the upper ten percent of your college class. And if you could send them a transcript at that time you were fine, you would not have to, you weren't considered for the draft. Well, then that was before they started drawing these numbers, okay. And, well, I said, "Jeez, I got a 3.2. I gotta be in the upper ten percent of my class." And I didn't take that test, which I really—as an art student, I wasn't gonna touch the math part of that. And so anyway, I didn't take the test and found out I wasn't in the top ten percent of my class either. And so that opened me up for the draft.

Webb: Okay, what was—you said your father had served, that there was a history of service in your family, what was maybe your family's immediate reaction to you being drafted?

Acheson: Again, my parents, I think they were, I said, “I got drafted, I'm gonna be in the Army.” I think they were proud that I was going in but scared. They were very, very scared of what was [unintelligible] up at that time. And, so, you know, it was pretty typical I think of any kid going off their parents are gonna be scared of what could happen to them and worry.

Webb: Did your father give you any particular advice?

Acheson: What did he tell me...? "Don't volunteer for anything." And he said, “Just be ready for when you get in the line for the—getting your shots,” he said, “You're going to see some of the biggest guys see that needle and pass out.” And, okay—but he was correct. But that was basically it, I mean, he had nothing really to... The biggest piece of advice, of course, was the "Don't volunteer for anything." You hear some noises in the back, can you hear noises in the background?

Webb: Yes, I think that's fine.

Acheson: Okay, it's one dog chewing on a bone, another dog rubbing his face on the ottoman. I'm gonna move to another... I'm sure they'll follow me. But you're okay right now?

Webb: I'd heard that advice given from other people that you don't volunteer for anything. I find it interesting that you put your first choice as your third write in for jobs that you would like. I've heard other people say that's the way to do it because if you put your first choice first you won't get it. So I'm interested why you maybe chose to do it that way.

Acheson: I guess I heard from some other people that were in that had did the military and that's how to really get what you want. Put your first choice third.

Webb: Okay, so it's January 1967, and you report in, what was kind of the step by step of getting down to St. Louis?

Acheson: Well, it was a really cold, gloomy day when we took off that morning to get to Fort Wayne in Detroit. And I just remember the morning as being, you know, like gosh, it might have been even two below zero that morning we took off. My parents drove me down there and in Flint, not Flint, in Detroit they used steam to heat buildings, the excess steam from the power plants, and some of the excess steam was always coming up through the man hole covers and because of it being so cold it was really coming up from these man hole covers and kind of a gloomy, gloomy morning. We got there and I was very apprehensive. So I got in to Fort Wayne, and of course then you go through all kinds of other rigmarole[s]. I think one of the things was because I had come in as a draftee I had to go in and take the oath as a draftee and then go back and take the oath again as a regular Army and for taking that extra year. I just remember a lot of tests, I kind of blend, I can't remember if it was just then that I took those tests or I took those tests when I had to show up for my physical back in October, November, but it kind of blends, that kind of blends together and I can't recall which was which but I do remember the night we went to the Detroit train station which was at that time just one of the most marvelous train stations in the country, and I remember getting on the train and the porter taking me to a cabin and put me in this cabin and asking me if he can get me anything. And I'm looking around, I got my own, I gotta sink in there, I got my own bed, I'm like, "What is this? I think he got me mixed up with..." He had to because other guys were just sitting in the seats, you know, and I got there, he woke me up in the morning, got me a cup of coffee. I said, "Boy, this is—this is a lot better omen than I had earlier." And we got off the train, got on some buses, and once you got off the bus and, at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, you certainly saw a different world. Even driving just Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. When I—when we got to the main gate, I looked around, I thought maybe, you know, there'd be a town there or something, but there was just nothing but a bunch of old trailers there, house trailers, and one looked like it might be a bar, and I'm sure the other three were houses of ill repute. [laughs] The trailers of... yeah.

Webb: What was the mood of everybody you were traveling with? Anybody get out of line? Or was everybody pretty much resigned to the fact that this is what was happening. I

mean, you get kind of Hollywood portrayals of the rebel in the military, and I just wonder if that is accurate or what was your experience with that?

Acheson: When we were on the bus, everybody was quiet, nobody was talking. No one was talking. I mean people were truly thinking about what was going on, or sleeping. And I say it was really interesting when we got off the bus, I never saw another one of those guys, but they could've been in my unit. I had... because we all looked the same when we walked out the next day, but none of those guys mouthed off or anything. We got into a line, we actually had to wait a week I believe before we could get sent, maybe it was ten days, or long, not that I guess, before we got sent to a basic training unit. We were just getting our equipment, our clothing, and sent to a temporary barracks—got out shots, got all of that taken care of. And in between all of that we'd go around pick up cigarette butts, paint white rocks white—happy hands are busy hands type of thing. One morning we got called in formation and guy said, “I need truck drivers.” He said, “How many of you guys ever driven a truck.” Nobody raised their hand. And so he says, “Oh, okay.” So he just went down the line you, you, you, you and you. And I was a truck driver for a while, while everybody else was picking up more cigarette butts and painting white stones white. And I actually was driving guys from—I had no idea where I was at. I mean, they had to draw us maps on how to get to a barracks, pick these guys up, and they were probably in their sixth, seventh week of basic training. I would take them out to the rifle range or take them out to a, something that they had to learn about that was, you know, out in the field. And I said, so, you get in these truck that had, like, I don't know, eight, nine, twelve gears. Hell, I never even got out of fourth gear. And they always gave me the one fingered salute when we got to the—out to the rifle range because these things were literally cattle cars that had poles put in for you to hang onto. Kinda like the trains in an airport, you know, how they got all the poles there for you to hang onto to get point A to B. So anyway, that's what I did while the... we waited for our cycle to begin. And once we got into that cycle we were put in with people that I've never seen before. Guy was my basic training buddy in my room. We actually had a nice building we were in, and it was upgraded. We didn't have the old World War II, clap-board, two-storied barracks. We had a brand new, modern type blocks made out of, you know, the blocks they build basements and things with, cinderblocks. And it was painted and it was nice and it was a nice looking building. The one fascinating thing was the type of people that you met. I had never met people that were very, when I say rural. We had farms around where we lived. We were kind of like in between the city and farm area when I was growing up, and we had farmers in our high school. But I'm talking about people that lived — they might not have even had indoor plumbing — joining up with us. And guys that had to sign their paycheck or their name with an X because they couldn't read or write. I found that to be a remarkable experience, and so it was a cross-section of the United States, it really was. That was the beginning and if you mouthed off to these guys that depended on what you did, you were always dropping and giving pushups. You had to remember the code of conduct,

you'd stand in line wait to get somewhere—a drill instructor would ask you, "What is Article 23 of the code of conduct?" And so you'd have to reply to that. Had to memorize that. And if you didn't know it, you'd give twenty pushups and you just studied it harder. Anyway, in—when we were out in the field doing things—pushups, exercise, doing certain things—he drill instructors would say, "Okay, no more jumping jacks for you, you gotta give me twenty pushups." Every now and then somebody would say something and they would come by and they would tell us to keep our eyes forward and you'd hear a lot of grunts and groans and then you'd get up and start your exercising again. And the guy that was—that had mouthed off was no longer in your unit when you got back. He had to probably either start basic training over or I don't know what other disciplinary things they had. Especially if he took a swipe at one of the instructors. And we had a couple of guys we lost over that. And we had one of the young kids that I really felt sorry for was out of the mountains of Virginia, steal a car. And then the car he stole belonged to a captain. And I heard that they caught him about ten days later and that was all I heard, nothing else, but I heard he was caught. So as far as people being smart asses, and giving a bunch of crap to these guys, if you did, I never saw what happened to the guy that did it because in most cases like I said they just, you didn't, you had your nose in the dirt and your hands over your helmet and you never looked back and all your heard was a lot of grunting and groaning and some cussing.

Webb: So, on that happy note, what—you had your exercises, your running I'm sure. What other kinds of training did they give to you during basic?

Acheson: Basic? Well they gave us courses in CPR [cardiopulmonary resuscitation], and what do you do if somebody's wounded. That type of thing. They taught us how to take a weapon apart, put it back together. You could be familiar with that. You had time limits on that. 'Course they march you out to the—sometimes out to the firing range, others times you're driven out. The time I was up there—you have to understand, that part of Missouri was crazy. In the morning we'd be out at five thirty in the morning standing in formation with snow up to our knees sometimes. Other times during the day you might start out like that and it might rise up to fifty, sixty degrees. You got leggings on and all this stuff, and you come back for lunch, you throw all that stuff in the barracks, and you go back out. Then in the evening, before you come back in for chow again, it could be dropped down to twenty-four degrees. 'Course, all your cold weather gear is in the basic—in the barracks. So that was a really horrible time to be there, plus we had to keep the floors immaculate. And you were always, like after formation you'd come back in and you cleaned it last night and now there a mess again. And, so, we always had people stay back during the day to tidy up the barracks and make sure there wasn't anything laying around or some guy have part of his sheet sticking out. You had to walk up and down all these different rooms, then inspection would come and they always found something somewhere. So you were, you had really no communication with anybody you'd just be walking around all day. It was called being the orderly of the day.

I also ended up being a sign, a road guard, it what they called us. And my roommate and I were both road guards. And we'd have to wear these stop signs, big, you know like stop sign like you'd see today. And we had a big rope of one around our necks. And we were always ahead of everybody so that we could, one of us go right, one of us go to the left, and hold up traffic until our troop had passed. Then we'd have to run and catch back up with them again and whenever that'd happen we'd do it again. But the nice thing about it was my roommate and I... you still there?

Webb: Yes.

Acheson: I guess that might have been a phone call coming in. Anyway, you could still chat, and you didn't have to be in perfect step which was really nice. So that worked out pretty well. Then, what else was there? There were other perks I had when you weren't—when you weren't hang on just a second, one moment. Okay, I can continue, I'm sorry.

Webb: Oh, no. No problem.

Acheson: I was a—the barracks orderly, my drill instructor and I, I don't know, we hit it off pretty well. And so he put me on a lot of really sweet jobs. I wasn't out in that snow storms, and I probably at least once or twice a week I was doing something different than the rest of the guys. Driving guys out to a rifle range or barracks orderly, or doing something else that, which I didn't mind, believe me. So that was kind of interesting, except, when you're finished with basic, one of the things that you have, well, when you're trying to finish basic, two things you gotta really do. One is the obstacle course, and that was a piece of cake for me. But I also had to qualify with the M14, which was very difficult. When I got off the cattle car that day, somebody's butt of the rifle hit my sight and I'd been working on, one of the things I missed was actually really making that sight, you could move it forward, backward, side to side, to sight it. Everybody's rifle was a little different. So I had it sighted in I thought perfectly and when that guy hit that, it was starting over but I had to qualify, meaning you had to at least put twenty shots on the target. Well, I mean, I had no idea where my shots were going, and I think I hit it sixteen times but the guy that was scoring me gave me twenty so I didn't have to repeat basic training. [laughs] I was sweating bad, really sweating that because I certainly didn't wanna go through basic training again. And, so I made it through, and I didn't find it all... I played football in high school, I ran cross country in high school, I ran track in high school, and I did a six—one day I did a six minute mile with my boots on. And, it was, I didn't find it all physically—from a physical standpoint—I didn't find it all of that rigorous. But I did from a mental standpoint, they do break you down. And they break you down to a point of, you know, you just do. You don't ask questions. And I think that's what they want, basically, cuz ost of these guys were going on to infantry training of some sort. I got my orders to report to Fort Monmouth in [New] Jersey. Now do you want me to continue from this point?

Webb: Yeah, I would just ask during this basic, are you certain that you've got, that you're going to be put into a, one of the positions that you've requested or is it still totally up in the air at this point and you're not really sure which lane, for lack of a better term?

Acheson: Yes, I understand. I think it was my first or second maybe third week I got my orders saying that I had been accepted at the Motion Picture School at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. So I knew I was gonna go. And there was another fella in my basic training cycle that, his name was Cal Crane, he was from Michigan, and he was going, too. But he was a still photographer. I had really no idea if we'd both end up going at the same time and everything. So anyway, I got my orders to report, I think it was the last week of basic training. And I was supposed to go to the United counter blah blah blah blah, and report and being, you know, I was gonna get a flight to, out to New York or something and we had to take a bus. So anyway, that was unbeknownst to me that was the last of my PT [physical training]. I never had to do physical training after that. And so, anyway, got on an airplane, flew to—I think it might've been LaGuardia—and took a bus to... try to think where that was, Asberry Park, or something like that, New Jersey. Walked to the—big duffel bag over to main gate, we were told where to go, reported in, and we were in an old two story clapboard barracks then. And I'm gonna guess there was probably forty of us sleeping in the same room. We had bunk beds and I know there was an oil furnace at one end of the building and then at the other end they were, two rooms, one of our NCOs, who had signed up for motion picture school, slept in one of the rooms, he had his own room. And from there we did have to clean the barracks still, but you didn't have to, you took turns and one week was this group, next week was another group, which was not too bad. I think I pulled KP [kitchen patrol] once or twice in basic, not in basic, in advanced training. Can we regress for a moment?

Webb: Sure, absolutely.

Acheson: Okay. Basic training, KP. Three thirty in the morning, you report. You walk outside and it's probably twenty degrees out. You walk over to the mess hall and first thing they give you is literally a, looked like a coal chute of potatoes. And all I did is have my hand in water peeling potatoes for hours.

Webb: What kind of peeler did they give you, is it an actual...?

Acheson: A paring knife. A paring knife. They gave me a paring knife to peel potatoes with. And I have never seen so damn many potatoes in my life. But in addition to us peeling them, they actually had these big cauldrons that they... like an auger was in them and they peeled the potatoes there as well. After breakfast, we had to clean everything up in the kitchen. The ranges, the tables that everybody ate on, and then go back and peel more potatoes. Lunch, same thing. You couldn't leave until they'd finish dinner. Then you went back and cleaned the barracks. And you didn't have to worry about falling asleep,

you were totally exhausted. And I think I did that once or twice in basic training. And then I think I only pulled it once in advanced training. But the worst job in the world was to clean what was known as the grease trap. I never knew anything about it. But at the end of the day, it is big enough for two people to get into, the grease trap. And it, anything that had grease was attached to this trap, and it was made out of cement and some kind of wires, things that held it from going through. And I mean you used a tooth brush at the end of the day to finally, I mean, you use scrapers, like paint scrapers to start with. And it was the worst job, I think I—I ended up getting a new set of fatigues afterward 'cause you just couldn't help but bump into this crap down there. That was—that was my last time, I think my one and only time I pulled KP in advanced individual training.

Webb: Was, was KP kind of reserved for maybe somebody that needed a little bit of discipline or was it just luck of the draw?

Acheson: Most of it was luck of the draw, but no, if you needed some discipline, you definitely were sent to KP. If you were a malcontent, you got sent to KP. And if you had to do that a few days in a row, I'm telling you, it just—you were being yelled at, all of the time. So, "Go, go, Ashley, go see Ashley." [Speaks to dog barking]. So anyway, I hated it. Every—every morning we got up, showered and shaved, and went to—and then we went to class. Well, we went to breakfast and then, maybe, back to spruce up the barracks. And then—and then we marched to class every morning. In the evening, after classes were over you—you never marched again. And this one fella that had re-upped to get to motion picture school, was an infantry sergeant and, he thought it was fun to march us to class. But when we went to class, it was like going back to college again. The whole—and their classes there were excellent, they had excellent instructors from, basically, World War II and Korea. And these guys had mostly been in combat and they taught the class extremely well. Their textbook that we had was probably one of the best and well written textbooks for cinematography and photography that I had. I still—still one of the best ones. And when I taught, when I was a teaching assistant working on my master's degree, I used to use that book to teach students about cinematography, and it was, it was just a great book, from that standpoint. You know, it didn't teach you much in terms of creativity, but it did teach in terms of how to use a camera properly. And it, it was very, very good at that part. I enjoyed my time at Fort Monmouth. I mean, we could leave the post anytime we wanted to. You didn't have to have a pass to get out and get back, you could go to the Jersey Shore, yeah, on the weekends I went to Washington, DC, several times, I went to the New York City several times. Four of us would stay in one room, split the cost, and we stayed in some real flop houses. [laughs] One time we went to Washington, DC, and we really, and then we were getting a loaf of bread and bologna and some mustard, have sandwiches. And we didn't have any money at the time. When I started, my first paycheck was ninety two or ninety seven dollars, somewhere in there. So you didn't have a lot of money, for the month and you stayed

mostly at the base and I joined the baseball team or the softball team I can't remember which one it was, I think it was baseball. And we studied. And we had a lot of camaraderie there and most of us really enjoyed taking our classes. And we had an, this instructor we had, I still remember his name, his name was Patterson. And he was a World War II cameraman, he got his hand shot and instead of winding the camera with his right hand he would hold the key and wind it, wind the whole camera and not use the key to winding he—he could wind the camera just holding his key in his hand. And he was a really, I thought was, you know, really, a great instructor, he—he would allow us, like the Barnum and Bailey train came in and they were setting up three big tops and, he said, “Okay, this is your assignment. Go over there, he said I don't care if it's putting up a tent, or feeding the animals, or cleaning up after the animals, or getting them out of their cages.” He said, “I want you to do a story”, and so I mean that was great. I had only seen that once before in my life, and I was probably in the fourth grade or something like that, third or fourth grade. But they had, I mean the elephants still put the tents up, and it was, you know, it was really neat. And I enjoyed it, so we did, I don't even remember what my story was at that time but we all did that. And then he would, he had a couple of us over, over to house for dinner a couple of times. And he just was a real forward thinking guy. And so I enjoyed the classroom activity. I enjoyed most of the students that were in the class. We got sent to New York City to the Army Pictorial Center for a couple of nights. We were there three days, I guess. We were sent to, and that's where they had the big cameras. I mean the huge studio cameras and we learned a little bit about that. I was operating a big 35mm camera like they used in Hollywood. And then we went to Fort Dix to learn about how infantry moves, and, you know, we were supposed to be following them with our cameras and how you get a, you know how, so you don't get yourself shot, okay. They were trying to teach us a little bit about that. Then we went up to, I'm trying to think the name of the place. It was the place where the Hindenburg went down... oh boy, it was a Naval Air Station. And we learned to film out of helicopters there. I actually got to see, they still had the, I don't know what they would call that, a Reberry? it was a different, it wasn't a... I guess it was like a hangar that they would keep the dirigibles in and they still had a couple over there, in those hangers. Lakehurst? I think that might've been it, Lakehurst, New Jersey Naval Air Station. That's where the Hindenburg went down. But they taught us how to film out of a helicopter there. And our train was, was fabulous, just fabulous. And like I say, I go up to New York, and if you wore your uniform you can get into Yankee Stadium free. At that, at that time there was a little bit more anti-war happening because now we're talking sixty-seven. Spring of sixty-seven. And you're started to hear more anti-war songs. One other interesting thing, when we walked into the barracks, something happened that I hadn't had in a long time was listening to music. They would not, you had no music at all in basic training. None. So, you go into the barracks and they're playing all the, you know, popular songs and that's the only time you could really listen to music. I mean if you had a transistor radio back then they would confiscate it, in basic.

Webb: Is that true? Is that true of all kind of personal mementos or—in basic you just really didn't have anything.

Acheson: You were, you were, you know, they told you what to bring. Think it was two pair of underwear, two pairs of socks, a shirt, and a pair of pants. You know, and your shoes. That's it. And if you had a jacket you could bring the jacket. A dop kit, which was, you know, your tooth brush, tooth paste, shaving soap and whatever, that was, that was all you were allowed. They saw you had anything else, I guess you could bring a picture of your mother and father, or girlfriend. You couldn't have it out. If it fit in your wallet I think you were OK. But, that was basically it. I mean, they.

Webb: So with the... Go ahead.

Acheson: Go ahead. No. No.

Webb: With the advanced training instruction you said there were about forty individuals in your class?

Acheson: Oh, no. There was forty individuals in our basic or not in our basic, but in our barracks there. Now those, those guys in there, it was some classmen that were in a class ahead of us. Downstairs, there was a class behind us, and maybe another class behind them. And they weren't all motion picture people either. They were, we went to different areas for the training. Still photographers went to a separate area from where the motion picture school was. The lab techs, they went somewhere else. So we had a mixture of all those people living in the barracks.

Webb: Would you say that the group was still kind of a, I don't know a nice way to say it, representative of all walks of life in the United States or were they more college educated?

Acheson: Oh, I would say most of them, most of us were probably had at least one to two years of college behind them when they got there. We had, well, I'll go into that later when I get to DASPO [Department of the Army Special Photographic Office], but, yeah, there was—it was interesting. We had people from Puerto Rico, Mexico, Philippines, blacks from all over. You know, it was a true cross-section of America that we had in, in that group of people that were taking these classes. Now, not everybody passed. And if you didn't pass these classes, guess where you were sent?

Webb: Would you say that they, I mean, you had some interest in art. You had taken these kinds of classes prior, was that kind of typical of these students or did some of them just kind of land in this because they wrote it down as their third choice?

Acheson: I think some of them got in their not knowing what the hell they were gonna get into. I really believe that. Some were just lucky to be there. Some, now we had three marines in our class, and I don't know how they got there and they didn't neither. One of them

did, who was a senior, I think he was an E-5 and he had re-upped to take this class. So I don't know how those marines, if they graduated or not, but if you didn't graduate, you were, you were sent, you know, you probably gonna end up being a ground pounder. Or something. Yeah, you wanted to make sure you got through this class. And what was interesting, we were never told about what we were, what we would be doing. What we knew we would be filming things and... but we didn't know how they broke out, like, were we going to go to an infantry division in the public information office? Were we gonna go to Germany? Gonna go to Vietnam? Were we gonna be stateside? We had no idea of, of photography detachments. We had none. And when my orders came it said DASPO. And I went and showed those to the sergeant and he said, "You are one of the luckiest son of bitches in the world." He said, "I have tried to get into DASPO." Well, we had three guys from my class go to DASPO. And we just happened to be in the right place at the right time and that was all there was to it. Oh, forgot one more thing. You're gonna hate me. I—let's go back to basic training for a minute.

Webb: No, that's okay.

Acheson: Something else just popped up. Towards the end of basic training, excuse me. No, nope, nope, nope. It's still coming, I'm sorry. Erase that. I'll just—that—I'll have to keep that thought because it's funny. Okay, well, anyway, I get these orders for DASPO, I have no idea what DASPO is, it sounded exciting to me, I stopped in Flint, Michigan, as my orders, I was going to Hawaii. And I thought, oh, my God, this Army life is really good. Going to Hawaii, wow, that's great. So I went home, I think I spent a week of leave at home. Met up with one gal, that I had proposed to, we talked about her coming over to Hawaii, and the future and blah blah blah and off I went. She was in college, and I went to a place in California in Oakland. It was called the Oakland Army Terminal. There must have been at any given time two hundred thousand guys going through that place it seemed like. You've heard of the Oakland Army Terminal, right?

Webb: I have.

Acheson: Okay, so we get there and I mean it is just filled with human beings there. Dragging my bag around, I got my orders, go all of this stuff, and then they have to give you another and give you another, have to find a way to get you to Hawaii. So while that is going on, you're assigned to another large barracks. And you're sleeping probably now with a hundred guys in the room, and guys are getting up and going different places all day and night, people are waking them up and off they go. Well, I didn't know anybody there. And one, one day, you know, I'm just screwing around walking around and get back to the barracks and there's this big ol' sergeant there and he says, "Son, can you cook?" Or no he said, "You cook?" That's what he said. I said "Yes, Sergeant." He said, "Come with me." I thought he had asked me if I could cook, he was asking me if I was a cook. So I had said, "Yes," so he takes me over very early in the morning to a place it's returning Vietnam veterans, and they're coming in and this is basically I think they're first meal.

And I was cooking steak and eggs for 'em. And when I was in college I would, we rented an apartment and there was four of us in it. And none of, none of the other three guys knew how to cook. And I had always watched my mom cook, and I could make a few things, but then I would call her and say, "Hey how do I do this? How do I make a Swiss steak? Or how do I make a pot roast?" So anyway, I learned to cook and I didn't have to clean anything. And so, that was a good deal for me for a year and a half. And so, you know, flippin' eggs and cooking steaks on a grill was no big deal. And, we get through with that, and we get to rest and sit around and BS, then all of a sudden somebody comes in and says "Okay, you guys are heading over to the officer's mess now 'cause general so and so and you're making his dinner, or his luncheon." Oh, okay. I get over there, and guy says you're in charge of making a Cesar Salad for seven hundred and fifty people. [Laughs] What? For who? So I walked over to these, they had civilian help there, most of them were Mexican, that were working as cooks. And I said, "I don't know what the heck he wants and how to even begin." They laughed and said, "Don't worry about it, we'll show you what to do and help you." So, we made a Cesar salad for seven-hundred-and-fifty people. And the sergeant that had taken me over there came over to see us cooks were doing and he gave me a pass and he says, "Anybody bugs you, you show 'em this pass from me that you're free to go anywhere you want to on this base." He said, "You did a great job today." Thank you. So I went back to the barracks, I'm in the barracks. And still waiting for orders to go somewhere, and another sergeant, I don't even, I couldn't tell an E-6 from an E-7 at that point, came in and said, "You, you, you, you, and you, get in your dress uniforms. Be outside in twenty minutes. There's a whole bunch of people out there." Buses pull up and we get on these buses, and we go downtown San Francisco, and we still don't know where in the hell we're going. Nobody's telling us anything. They took us down for a dinner some place in San Francisco and got back on the bus and went and saw the Ice Capades. Yeah, we're all going, "Oh, crap. What's going on now?" You know. So that was pretty nice, and I think next day or day shortly after that I was taken to the San Francisco Airport, getting on a flight, United, commercial flight to Hawaii. And who do I run into, a guy named Bert Peterson. Bert Peterson was a classmate of mine at Fort Monmouth. And we were buddies, I mean, we went to New York and down to DC together, he didn't know I was going DASPO. I didn't know he was going, I never saw him again after we—the day we got our orders. That morning I never saw him, he disappeared. There was another guy that had taken leave from our class, Al Bower, who was going with us as well, or Dan Bower was his name. And—but he came later. So anyway Bert and I sat together on the plane over to Hawaii, and we get off and God, everything, I mean, I couldn't believe how beautiful it was then. Yeah, free pineapple juice and oh, this is great. After a while, I hated the smell of pineapple juice. But anyway, he and I got off, somebody picked us up and took us to the first sergeant. Told us where we were gonna be and went over to the barracks together, and Bert says he got some gal he's gonna marry. And he said, "I'm only marrying her so I can live off base." Jeez. Anyway I thought it was BS from him, but I ended being his best man at his wedding and he ended up divorcing her. They still are

friends but I don't know. Anyway, we went to the barracks, and jeez, there was a lot of guys there from the class in front of us that had, we were in the barracks with, you know, two months ago. So then the next morning we reported back over there with first sergeant from there on we were just given motion picture training, filling out forms, we had to go get a passport. No big deal, passport. I didn't even know until probably I'd been with DASPO six months that passport we had wasn't just any old passport, it was a, at that time, a burgundy passport, which meant we can go get in the diplomat line and go through that, which was kinda nice.

Webb: Yeah, absolutely.

Acheson: Yeah, and so we didn't have to stand in line, you know, go through the regular red tape and everything. So again, I had no idea. Well, anyway, we did that, got our shots, and next thing I knew, I got orders for Thailand and one of the guys that came in a couple classes behind me also had the orders, his name was Rick Ryan. And we went out to the airport and again it was commercial flights the whole way, and gosh, all these guys are out there saying goodbye to us and yea we thought that was just great, you know, about half the people from the unit were there. We're all drinking and everything, we get up to go get on the plane. We're given the bill for everybody. Well, we knew we just got our TDY pay, which was at that time I believe it was eighteen dollars a day, in advance for our trip over there 'cause we stayed in a regular hotel. We didn't stay in a military hotel, and we're all in civilian clothes and it was amazing. So, Rick and I we just thought, "Oh shit." [Laughs] That was a pretty expensive evening for two, I think we were both privates then. Getting, I think, one hundred eighteen dollars a month. You imagine? Living on a hundred and eighteen dollars a month? Oh, my God. Anyway, Hawaii was an expensive place to live, by the way.

Webb: Ever back then?

Acheson: Even back then, yeah, yeah. Gas over in the States was twenty-four cents a gallon. There it was like forty-two cents, and just to give you an idea, you could buy a round steak in a store in the Midwest for maybe fifty-nine, sixty-nine cents a pound, and over there it was like a dollar nine a pound. You know, just giving you some kind of an idea what how much more it cost to live there. Course you, if you got a hamburger or anything off base it was, you know, crazy expensive. So anyway, we took our money and got on the plane and off we go to Bangkok, Thailand. For a little guy that had never been out of, out of, really, I think we went to New York once in 1954 with my parents, I was nine years old, going out to Nebraska a couple of times, and I went to Washington, DC, when Kennedy was—funeral was happening and got to see the caisson being, you know, body being loaded on it, taken to Arlington, [Virginia]. And other than that, I had not been anywhere except Fort Leonard Wood, back to New Jersey after that for my AIT [advanced infantry training]. Going to, going to Hawaii was like a big adventure, then off to Thailand. I really didn't know what to expect. And it was everything could hope it

would ever be. My friend, Rick, who was a couple of years younger than me, his dad was in charge of enlarging the air base at Cadida? for B-52s, his father had a real good job and Rick lived in Okinawa his last two years before he got drafted or joined up and so he kinda knew about, you know, what was going on with the ladies and things. I had no idea, so he's telling me all of this stuff on the way over and, you know,, we'll go to one of these massage parlors and this is gonna happen and that's gonna happen but he said, you know, it's, you gotta pay them a little extra for this and that, what we'd a happy ending and okay, okay. So I put that in the back of my brain. As soon as we got to our hotel, we were given a briefing by the officer in charge. I think there was only one, two, three, four, five, five of us there at that time. That's, it never, I don't think he ever got any larger than that unless our CO [commanding officer] came over for a trip to check out what was going on out of Hawaii but that was only for a couple of days, but, basically, it was five of us. So Rick and I'm dead tired, I mean, we'd hit a typhoon on the way over and we were forced to land at a Navy base in, and I mean this was a civilian flight and it was very interesting. We had to go in one of those Quonset huts and, ride out the storm cause they couldn't get to the, I think they were trying to get to Manila to refuel and landed on a, on a runway that started at one end of the island and stopped at the other end of the island. And it was a real, they just couldn't get around it and get in, so anyway we were whipped. And so Rick said, "Let's go get a massage", I said that sounds like a great idea. So we get over there and I had no idea what to expect so they had all these gals with numbers on them and you pick a number and off you go to a room. Well I had never seen anything like it, it was a huge round tub you had to take a, kinda like a stairway up to get into it, you know, seven steps on the side of it or something, and the gal that's with me, she's completely nude and telling me to take my clothes off. I'm going, "holy crap, this is pretty good." In we jump, well, anyway. First time I ever had anything like that, and then that night we, being the American boys we were, Rick said, "Let's go out and find a couple young ladies." Oh, okay. So we go out and we find two young ladies and we were with them for a while, had a drink or two, they said, "You take us to Thai heaven?" Well I thought that was terminology for sex, oh yeah we'll take you Thai heaven. Go back to the hotel, we do what we do, after we're done, kind of deflated my ego, both girls said to Rick and I, "Now you take us Thai Heaven?" We thought, what the hell they talking 'bout? Well, it was the name of a bar. So anyway, we were, the next morning when we woke up, boy. We were exhausted. That was our introduction to Thailand. And every morning, I had the same thing the whole time I was there I think. Basically, I had fried rice with chicken in it, fried egg on top of it with fish sauce. I thought I was pouring soy sauce on it all the time, I said, "Boy this is a little different than American soy sauce, but it tastes pretty good." I had no idea it was fish sauce until I got to Vietnam. And they said, "Oh, that smell, that's 'nước mắm.'" Oh, okay. It was nasty, you can smell nước mắm at ten thousand feet. But, what I'd been putting on my eggs was essentially the same thing as nước mắm. So anyway, we learned to speak Thai while we were there, we traveled all over Thailand doing stories. One of the first stories I did was Thai troops going to Vietnam. You know, leaving

the country I think it was the first group of Thai troops, maybe. Next thing I did was a place called Sattahip, where they were bringing in ships and they were building this port to handle all the munitions that were coming in and, you know, where they were bringing in bombs for, five-hundred pound bombs for B-52s. The base was just up the road for that and then we'd fly up to northern Thailand, went to Chiang Mai and after Chang Rai and do stories on things that were up there. It was a, I think it was a listening post. And even though we had secret clearances and top secret on some things, like this job they just told us to shoot this this this this, never told us what it was. And you know, there were dials and all of the stuff that they were doing. They had these big, huge antennas outside that were the same shape, the round, oval ones. And never did find out what the hell it was. We just filmed it. Then we rented motorcycles up there and went up to the king's palace, summer palace, and then in our free time in Bangkok, we would rent motorcycles and go out in the, I mean, we would go out into places that they'd never seen an American before. Kids would jump out of the windows of the schools and run up and touch us and, you know, because they'd never seen Americans I mean, we were, we were going just where the paths would follow, we went across some bridges that were' bout maybe eight inches wider than the tires that were going across on. We had a ball. We had a ball in Thailand. And I came back from there and bought a motorcycle in Hawaii and, of course, the rainy season was coming up and I remember I was gonna go to Christmas, I had planned to go to Christmas mass after I went and saw this young lady that I was dating and I was gonna go to midnight mass and I got caught in a horrible rain storm and I had no other civilian clothes to wear and they were just soaking wet. And so I wore my uniform to midnight mass, I was the only person in at midnight mass with a uniform on. Everybody else was—this was on base—everybody else was in civilian clothes. So couple of days after Christmas, first sergeant came in. "Acheson, get in here." Okay, the hell did I do now? He said, "Sit down, Son." He said. "I wanna tell you how proud I am to have you in my unit. You were the only soldier and you wore your uniform to midnight mass. You were the only one in there." He says. "We should've been in uniform like you." Oh, God. So I didn't tell him the rest of that story until about twenty years ago.

Webb: And what was his reaction his reaction twenty years later?

Acheson: He just laughed. He thought it was pretty funny, too. I said, "Well, Sarge, anything I can do to help you, you know, back in those—or you can help me back in those days." He was a tough bugger.

Webb: Can you, maybe, elaborate a little bit on how the assignments were passed along to you?

Acheson: Sure, sure. In Thailand, there was a lot of training activity that was going on. Special Forces were, you know, training Thai troops. Thailand sent an awful lot of troops to Vietnam. And so the Pentagon—and again, I'm just finding out about these chains of

command, and how all of this works. I mean, now, I'm completely new, I knew how lieutenant, first, second lieutenant reported to first lieutenant on up. Well, we had a unique situation. We reported to nobody in any of the countries that we worked in. We reported to the Department of the Army. And, let's digress for a minute. DASPO came about, I don't know, have you heard this story, if you have, you know, I'll just do it very briefly how DASPO came about.

Webb: I'd like to hear your perspective on that, yes.

Acheson: Okay, all right. Well, I—I've—I go around speaking to a lot of different organizations, last two weeks ago I was in San Antonio, [Texas], I spoke to 4th Infantry Division. I was with them in one of their big fire fights, and I gave them a power point on what, and showed them film of them for they hadn't seen in forty seven years. But I told them a little bit about what motion picture photography and how it, why we were doing what we were doing. Well, the story goes that General George, oh boy, I can't think of his last name off hand, it'll come to me, had just walked out of a meeting with Kennedy, President Kennedy and [US Air Force General] Curtis LeMay. And he turned to his aide and he said, something like, "That damn Lemay keeps showing him these films of his." And he said, "We're gonna start our own group that's doing this stuff." So, Decker was his name, [US Army General] George Decker. He was a four star general. And so, the command came down to put this together, it started over out of the Army Pictorial Center picking people to fill the slots to start this, this program. We had a lieutenant, he was a lieutenant colonel at the time, I talked to him on the phone several times, we communicated, and I, I just forgot his name, as well, so bear with me. Yeah, that'll come back, but he formed with other officers and cameramen that he had worked with at the Army Pictorial Center. And our chain of command was the General Decker's, I'm trying to think of the right word for that, okay. He was, General Decker was chief of staff, okay. And his chief of staff, General Decker's chief of staff, was the guy we ultimately reported to and he would fill General Decker in. Now they had a, when film would come back they would process it in New York, take it right up to the Pentagon in DC and they had a viewing room there that all the generals would come in and look at what was going on. That was the only way that they could see anything that was going on at that time 'cause live TV was not a, you know, an international thing, at that point. And moving those kind of cameras around that they had, we had, there was no small cameras that weighed under two hundred pounds for video at that time. So, I'm trying to think of his name yet. Colonel, Colonel X formed a DASPO CONUS [Continental United States], which covered the United States and Europe, and Africa. And we had DASPO Panama which covered South America. And then there was DASPO Pacific which covered everything from Australia all the way up to Alaska, Thailand, Okinawa, Taiwan, Vietnam of course, and everything in between. So they, the very first commander of DASPO Pacific was a fellow by the name of Claude Beige?, and he had teams into Thailand and into Vietnam, and they actually started doing work in 1962 and they were the ground breakers, I mean

they're the guys that really, really put things together for the rest of us so, after, I got there in '68 in Vietnam. And things were already, you know, except where we would do certain things, we had a place to stay. I mean those early guys, they stayed in apartments and hotels, different hotels, because they had not, there was only a, I don't know how many American soldiers were there at that point in time, in '62. Mostly Green Berets training. They were scattered throughout the country and how do you get mail, how do you send equipment back, how do you get, you know, film stock, et cetera. What do you eat, what do you live on? So that's where all this per diem came in that I was talking about, in Vietnam it was twenty-six dollars a day. That's what we used to live on. We all pooled our money finally and we had a, a house in Vietnam they called houses villas. When my wife went over with us she was expecting something with topiaries. She was sadly disappointed. It was fourteen of us living there, now there was something like seventeen families living in the same space. Well, anyway, going back, they formed a unit in CONUS that covered the rest of the world other than South America we had a team down there from 1962 on. So when we were in Thailand my higher officer was a lieutenant and he was kinda on the job training and this was, I think at the time this might've been his first assignment by himself and he would get orders from Hawaii who got them from Washington, DC to cover certain, certain jobs, like the one I was telling you about up in the Chiang Mai area with the radar. That came from DC. Now we would have, he knew that the very first group of Thai's were leaving for Vietnam so we went over and covered that because he knew about it, and he seemed, also knew that we were on standby whenever, you know, we got the phone call that was gonna happen. There were jobs that he would find out about but how the Army was helping build these bridges or these docks up in Sadahib so we'd go up and cover that. We found out about a job that was going on down in southern, way southern Thailand, where the, I mean they were still having problems with Muslims down in that, the Muslims and the Buddhists never liked each other. But, the Special Forces were down in that area training Thai troops about, you know, jungle warfare. And they were, these were elite Thai troops that they were training down there. Another place we found out about was an area where they were testing military equipment to see how the jungle affected them, different things, and we covered that. Another one might've been the guys went out and covered a village that was being treated by our doctors and dentists, like one woman had got bitten by a snake and she had her whole part of her leg up 'til her knee was full of gangrene, you know, and they took people like that back to a hospital and they showed kids how to brush their teeth. It was a, that was, those orders the ones that we knew that we had to film, came out of DC when we weren't busy it was up to our commanding officer of that unit to find stories for us to film.

Webb: And then you also were able to come up with your own stories on your free time or that was, purely, you know, you're going into these villages on motorcycle and probably taking some still photos?

Acheson: We would take our own still photos but, it wasn't, those weren't really, we never could take the motion picture camera cause somebody might be going to another job on that, but we would, we would, you know, we had one guy that we called Bones. Bones was the doorman at the hotel and he was our age, and he helped us find our way around when we would go on these things, he became a real, real friend of ours. And not just, I never went back to Thailand after that, but some of the guys went back for a second time in Thailand and Bones always stayed around and even when we moved from another hotel, he got a job at the hotel that DASPO was in cause he, you know, he was really a pal of ours. Well, in 1994, one of the guys in our group, Tom Mintier [1:33:55], who worked for CNN, he was a bureau chief for, he was put in the bureau chief position for Bangkok. He was on a radio call in show one night, and somehow Bones, at that time, happened to be listening to the radio. And he heard Tom's voice, now Tom married a Thai woman in, in, from Bangkok and her family still lived there, and I think Bones may have known some of them, but he heard Tom's voice and he knew right away. So he called in and he said, "Tom, I know your nickname." Tom says, "I'm putting you on hold for a minute, this must be Bones." And we all wondered what happened to Bones, and it's just fabulous when I started doing work in Thailand for the automotive companies and, gosh, I got to meet up with him and his family. And Bones became like a superintendent of a school system, his wife was a head nurse of one of the hospitals, his son went to the Air Force Academy, his daughter got a master's degree. What a wonderful family! And Bones came to my house in Michigan when he went over to see his brother who was working on his PhD at University of Chicago. You know, I'm jumping around, I'm sorry. But it kind of all, kind of all ties in together. So, all right. Well, I'm probably boring you to death. Let's see, let's see. Okay, so we were, I was talking about doing all those different jobs, we learned how to speak Thai, we would go to these outdoor markets and argue with guys in Thai, and that's how we learned to speak it. So anyway, Thailand was just, I mean, it was just a great assignment. Plus we had hot and cold running women the whole time we were there, I mean it was just, one of the best assignments you can possibly have. And then, went back to Hawaii and it was like in, around mid-December and January rolled around and they were figuring out who's going back to Vietnam next and when you'd be going out. And 'cause we were still training, you know, still learning how to do certain things. Oh, Tool and Johnson came, I believe came in at that point in time for a visit. And we, we filmed, filmed them and their press conferences and different things. And then after that we were scheduled to go out I think, February, say 25th, to go to Vietnam. And something happened over there called Tet, and they sped that up as fast as they could and we got over there on the 11th of February. First thing I know, I'm up and away, and filming what's going on and around that area. Then I went to a place called Kon Tum with Harry Breedlove, and Harry Breedlove was probably the best photographer we had in the unit at that time. And he was just fabulous. Harry was one of these guys that was raised in the holler, and I don't think he had any shoes until he got in the Army. And he had the "knack." He could see light and dark. He could see contrast, and he could see a simple image of a guy

just eating some c-rations and take that picture, and it was beautiful. He was a great photographer. He really was. And he was teaching me, and he was helping me, and Harry, if you didn't listen to Harry he could care less. He'd just go on and leave you alone. But I, I tried to gain as much knowledge from him as I could. And he showed me how to get out of Saigon up to any place in the country and how to get back. And so, I was probably on one or two assignments with him but boy, what a wealth of knowledge. And then I, they started sending me out with guys that, that was there first job ever with DASPO, you know? So it was my responsibility to get us up country, or wherever we were going and get us back. Getting up to the, like up in I Corps way and Khe Sanh et cetera. was not a problem, it was getting back was always a problem. 'Cause we had a scheduled flight to get us up there, but getting back we had, we had press cards so allowed us to bump people and get on the flights 'cause of our film having to get back to DC. But, you still had to, if there was wounded or flag rank on there you just had to wait for the next flight.

Webb: The bring up Mr. Breedlove reminds me of a question that I did have. I know that, you know, when you guys were filming dials or antennas or whatever there's probably not too much of an artistic opportunity, but with some of the other assignments, I'm curious whether there was a sense of competition between some of you guys of who could get a really good shot or whether it was just you know, "There's the assignment. Let's go out, get it, and then come back."

Acheson: It was both of that in there, and I enjoyed the sitting in a screening room and somebody, people saying, "Whoa, look at that!" Whether it was because you were brave because you got shots that nobody else got. Or whether you were doing something that was very creative. Now in motion picture it's a lot different. I mean you've gotta put sequences together to make it presentable. You know, you, cause there's people flowing certain ways and you gotta be able to show that and what they're looking at and make a scene interesting. So, you can do that in a lot of ways, light it a certain way, do certain things, and so you're just you know, trying to be as, I always instead of just trying to light a job, and if I was inside, I would always try and make it as creative as I could, even if it was a job just shooting dials. And, years later one of the guys found that found that job, put a soundtrack with it, somebody, he edited it too cause he had all the raw footage but my, what do you call it, captions were included in the video so when he edited it, he edited it with captions. He typed on there what piece of equipment it was called or something, you know, I mean, it was pretty interesting. And then I had no idea what a LC576D was, you know. Still don't. But when you put those on there, it ended up being a pretty creative job, and it was only like a minute long or something or two minutes long. But, you know, one of the other jobs that I had to do was a job on tunnels and railroad bridges in Korea. Now, you talk about a boring job. Oh, my God. So we—DASPO filmed every tunnel and railroad bridge in Korea. And some guys would just go up and take a, you know, pan the track and go back. I'd go up and wait for a train to come out of a

tunnel, or a train to go across a bridge to, you know, or two trains so I could change the shots around a bit. Give it a little more interest then, you know, just a crap job, like some people had. So, well anyway, that's, that's how I, I, I, and we did have, there was a number of us that felt competitive. We did this on a basis of, we were all trying to be better cinematographers is what the end note was. And we all learned from each other. I saw somebody do something I hadn't done, you know, I'd learn from them. Or if somebody would say, "God, that's crappy lighting. You need to get some light on the side or something, to me." And, you know, that's how we learn from each other, and we had a, the competition that we had was always friendly. It wasn't, I mean there was guys in our group that were there that could keep a shot in focus but yeah, that was about it. And everybody knew who, who the good cinematographers were and who the good, you know, cameramen were, and the still guys too, so it was... From my standpoint, I found it very creative. And that's what I was into, I was more into the creative end of it, trying to make something out of this. I mean some of the jobs we got were, you know, showing how a bulldozer works, you know. God almighty. Some of them were pretty boring.

Webb: Knowing that some of the people had a little bit more talent as you've said. Were they chosen for assignments that maybe asked for, I mean, maybe not chosen for the bulldozer story, or was it purely, you know, it's you're time, you go cover this assignment. How was it that people were chosen for the assignments? I guess is the best way to say it.

Acheson: Uh, well...

Webb: Because you only had a team of two or three people with you at any particular assignment; is that correct?

Acheson: That's true, we had one—I'll give you a couple of examples. My second trip to Vietnam was not hardly as bad as my first trip. They were training a new lieutenant how to go out, how to operate in the villa, and how assignments are put together. Well, he knew that Tom Mintier, the guy who ended up being the bureau chief for CNN, and myself were, had a good reputation as camera men. So he took the two of us and a still guy, he really didn't know too much about it. I think he might've been the only one back, and we went out on a job that took us about six weeks. And we would come back after ten days sometimes, or three days and restock, I mean some of the jobs we had we were so filthy that people would look at us when walk through a base camp, we'd have to go get new uniforms, we were pretty bad. But we did a job on a training film for Fort Sill, Oklahoma. Fort Sill is the artillery center for the US Army, and so John basically came along as, he was basically a producer and a director. And he graduated from Brooks Institute of Photography, and before he got in he was shooting before he got drafted. And John was a really good guy to work with, except, he always wanted to take the camera away from people. I told him, I said, "No way, you're not taking the camera away from me, I'm

shooting.” You know, he just loved to shoot. And so, you know, we got into this job, and Tom and I really worked well together and we put some good footage together and then, sometimes, we'd get split up and do some other things. But we worked on this job off and on for six weeks and poor John got in between the guy that was our commanding officer at Saigon, and couple of sergeants. I mean, this job we were on was bad. I mean, we would take, they'd put us out into an area in the Parrot's Beak, which is right at the Cambodian border. Could've been in Cambodia, but it was called a bait base. And this was something new that they were just trying, and it was a triangle type of setup, two triangles, like Star of David. And there was a 105 [mm] howitzer sat each tip of the star. And they put a big moat around, around this base that they brought in bulldozers to bulldoze it out. Then they had the concertina wire around outside it, and in the moat. Then they filled the moat. Oh, my God, every five feet was a fifty gallon drum of half, airline, jet fuel and gas, maybe some of it even had some jelly in it, and so they had that all the way around, and then we had firing positions. Now these cannons, these 105's, were shooting, they had three types of rounds. High explosive, they had what was called WP, Willie Peter, which is white phosphorus. And then they had another round, it was called a flechette round and it was a beehive, is what I think they referred to it as, and it was filled of these little tiny nails. So, during the day when they built this, there were other artillery positions far away that bracketed this base during the day, figuring out, you know, where fire. So we had that fire support and then we had, when they lit the moat at night, if the NVA [North Vietnamese Army] were coming, the moat would blow up and you'd have a ring of fire around the base. And Puff had already probably in the air, two minutes away. And, so they'd bring Puff and he'd, they'd have a field day shooting these guys. They would drive up in trucks on the Cambodian side with their lights on. And about four-hundred to five-hundred of them would attack this base. Well, they'd let 'em come in really close because of the, these weapons, these new shells that they had. The beehive, they could make it go out a thousand yards or range for it to go out two-hundred yards and blow. And when it would blow, it would blow sideways, you know. Out front, so you had a field of fire that covered the whole base. And then they would call in Puff, and they would also have the artillery coming in. They would shoot white phosphorus out, well, white phosphorus, you familiar with that?

Webb: I am, but go ahead.

Acheson: Okay, yeah, yeah. Well, white phosphorus will burn underwater. You get that on you and the only way to get it out is take a knife and pop it out of there and cut around it. It's horrible. But they could do the same with white phosphorus, shoot it out two-thousand yards, a thousand yards, a hundred feet. And that was pretty miserable. And then, of course, they had the high explosives. They didn't really use that until they, until they withdrew. But that, that became a big deal and so we were out there in the middle of that one night, and we had incoming and outgoing, and oh man, what a , you can't

film at night either. Our ASA [Army Security Agency] on our, on our cameras was ASA 16, daylight. So you had to have a lot of light to be able to film. And so, all we could do is either grab a weapon or hunker down so we could film what was going on, how they set it up, and how they took it down. We couldn't actually film anything at midnight other than a, I don't even know if an explosion would show up on ASA 16. I think we tried and nothing, nothing much happened. So, it was, yeah, you hoped the thing was the whole point of the incoming shells and mortars didn't hit us. On that story, we got into a lot of stuff all the way through it. Like I said, we had two letters from flag officers thanking us for the job we did. That came filtering all the way down through other, like lieutenant colonels, majors, captains, whatever. And then I was named cinematographer of the year for the Department of Defense on what I filmed on that story, and that was in 1969 and that was the National Press Club that gave me that honor, so. We had some daylight stuff going on. And, so anyway that was basically that job. But going back to my first time there, I covered Khe Sanh twice, I covered the assault into Asha from the North, and then I went around to the South and covered it with the 101st Airborne, going north. I filmed a battle that happened up north of Huế town called, town little village that had been destroyed called Thon La Chu where one of the members from B troop was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. Then I went down and filmed the mini Tet that was going on. So, I had a, I had a lot of stuff I did that first time I was in, in Vietnam. And I was wounded at that one where the guy won the, was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Webb: Would mind talking about that a little bit?

Acheson: Sure, it's really an interesting, was an interesting job. Myself and a still cameraman went in. And I had a camera that was run by a battery belt, and I couldn't carry, even carry my own water. So the still guy carried my water for me. And so we covered most of the day, going into this town, what was left of it. It looked like, when I got into that town or little village. It looked like a Hollywood set. I mean, there might be walls in the front, and the back is completely gone. Or walls in the back and the front's completely gone. Looked like something out of an airstrike that you would see in Italy or Germany during World War II. There was nobody in there. They were all gone, except for the enemy. We were told that we were going into go in and chase out some VC that were still hanging around in the area. We ran into a part of a regiment that was still there. And they were NVA. I remember just walking along and then taking a break and all of a sudden, I mean, literally, probably twenty-five feet in front of me, somebody's opening up with AK-47s and firing out a RPG [rocket propelled grenade]. Like holy shit. And somewhere else broke out again. I mean, it was, I mean, a true, what's another word for trap, you know, we walked into an ambush is what it was. And the, I got into a temple. Now I've got pictures of what that temple looks like today, but it is amazing. I was in this temple filming and, you know, a motion picture cameramen has... still there?

Webb: I'm still here.

Acheson: I'm afraid this phone is going to go out and we might not be able to talk again for a day. Anyway, the motion picture cameraman, I could not wear a helmet and put my camera up to my face. Hang on just one second.

Webb: Okay.

Acheson: Okay, you back?

Webb: I'm here.

Acheson: Okay, so, you couldn't, you couldn't film with a helmet. I mean, there was no way. So here I am with a jungle hat on, my camera is up to my eye. I have to stand up and get a steady shot for, at least, ten to twelve seconds, okay. With motion picture footage. And that footage cannot be jiggly, it has to be steady. And then you duck down, and you gotta get up and do it again 'cause first shot might been a long shot, the next shot could've been a little tighter. You have to build a sequence. So I'm standing up when incoming is coming in, and filming. And you can, on the footage that I shot, some of them you can see hitting the building and you could see hitting the big columns that were in front of me. And that was a, it was just coming in hot and heavy. I go blown out of the temple with an ABC cameraman it was, with a Vietnamese stringer. He and I both got blown out with a RPG. I had no idea concussion should send a person, you know, twenty feet. And if for some reason, he got a couple of teeth chipped and his ears were bleeding. I couldn't hear very well. And I mean, I got this big long lens sticking out right. And I'm sure that light was reflecting off of them. They must have thought I was some kind of scope or something because they kept shooting at that area. Well, I got along a brick wall outside of the temple and the still cameraman that was with me, just as this action happened I said, "Come with me, don't pull a John Wayne." So, what does he do? He runs and jumps into a bomb crater. Well, where he was at he was shooting a camera that was called a, what's it I'm trying to think, a Rolleiflex, and you have to look down into the camera to focus it and do stuff. Well, he couldn't do that, I mean, this thing was being dusted all the time with incoming so he couldn't even make a shot. Later on after we sent our films in and everything. Mine came back but I never saw a picture that he took that whole entire day. So anyway, I yelled out to him I'm going around to another position. And I ran into a couple of guys, meanwhile, all, I mean, this is all going on took, this first fire fight we were in was five minutes long. And the 101st Airborne, B troop, 2/17. 101st Airborne killed fifty-five NVA in five minutes. That's a lot to kill in five minutes. We had one of the troops of 101st get, was KIA [killed in action]. The rest, fourteen of them, were wounded in action. But this was just the beginning of the action. I filmed this sergeant and he was leaning against a tree with his shirt off and a big bandage around him. That footage up to that point in time, I shot a lot of dead NVA. You guys have that footage, by the way. With the soundtrack to it. Take a look at it. And Ken's [i.e. former PMML, CEO, Ken Clarke?] got it. And it's called, and I think it's called, "Ambush at Thon La Chu." So he's got that, it's about six, seven minutes long. Originally

three minutes of that was sent to NBC and ABC. And I never could find any of the other footage that I shot that day of this sergeant. I found it about three years ago. And I kept my captions. I didn't know his name, but I knew the unit, 2/17th. So I was able to track them down, found out they were having a reunion in San Antonio. Went down to the reunion and there were two guys there from that unit. And they were involved as a mortar team, they didn't actually get into the battle that we got into. And I said there was this crusty old sergeant who got hit in the stomach that day cause they were kind of were incredulous that I filmed this battle. As soon as I said that crusty old sergeant they say, "Oh, you're talking about Bernt. Sergeant Bernt." And Sergeant Bernt, when I took these pictures he was a crusty old guy. And found out later he was only six years older than me, but he'd been to Vietnam several times. Amazing. But, anyway, I wrote his name down and everything. About a year after that I found the footage. And kind of cut it together a little bit and brought it in back here to Texas with me. I called up the association, they said Bernt was dead, okay, so I called up their association and I said, "Look, I got a guy whose name's Sam Bernt. He was a platoon sergeant, da da da this day of May 6th, nineteen sixt—" "Oh! That guy, yeah he's been to our last two reunions. I said, "What, I said he's dead, they told me he was dead." "No, he's not dead. "I said, "Well, do you have his phone number?" They said yeah. Now I live forty five minutes south of Fort Hood, which is in Killeen, Texas. And I said, "What's this area code here?" They said, "That's Killeen, Texas." I couldn't believe it. I called him up and he said, I heard about you. Somebody told me some camera man had been looking for me for forty-some years. I said, "That's me" So we met for lunch, hamburger joint, I brought with me and showed him the footage. This guy retired as a Command Sergeant Major, 101st Airborne. Two purple hearts, Two, I think he's got two Silver Stars. Tough, tough, tough guy. He cried like a baby when he saw that footage of that day. He couldn't believe it. He and I have been friends ever since. And we go out to lunch at least once every other week. Found two guys from that same fire fight that was down in San Antonio, we have lunch with them about every five weeks. It's amazing, just amazing. The friendships that developed out of this, forty-seven years later. Now, back to the firefight for the rest of the story. The still guy that was with me had my water. Now, this started at 4:30 in the afternoon when this fire fight took place. I looked for him, and looked for him. Now, B troop was probably over a hundred men, okay? So I kept moving around in them and filming at the same time as I went. And it was getting' dark, I think the last shots I made was of a helicopter coming in and making a pass, a couple of passes. And that was about it. I couldn't film anymore, it was just getting' too dark. I kept looking, looking for Ken Powell. Well, nobody had seen him. What he had done, took off with my water, jumped on a medevac, not a helicopter but an APC [armored personnel carrier] that was heading back to wherever with some of the wounded on it. He left me, well, I didn't know that at the time, and I stayed there all night looking for him. Until two o'clock in the morning was the next time I had a drink and I used a guy's canteen. And we were in a rice patty, where there was a water buffalo looking at me. And I sunk that into this foul, I mean I couldn't tell but I mean it was foul water, it

smelled like hell, threw it in a bottle with an iodine tablet, shook it up. Shifted the silt from the water through my teeth so I could have a drink. And you know what, to this day that's the best drink of water I've ever had. I mean I was completely exhausted, the adrenaline, we were getting hit every two or three minutes, we'd drive over a bunker with these tanks, we had two tanks and five APC's, and we'd go over these spider holes and these guys they'd jump up behind us and start firing at us. And we had guys firing at us from the front. And we kept movin' and movin' and movin'. And I got hit just as it was getting dark. A guy had thrown a grenade into a, into a bunker and, "Fire in the hole" was shouted, and I dove and I got hit in my leg and my ass. It actually went through my hip bone and splintered in there. And went all over the place. And I didn't even know it. I thought I got hit with a chunk of debris or dirt or something and I just kept moving all night long. And when we walked out the next morning, it was getting light, just as we were getting ready to walk out of this forest area, into an older, was a landing zone that'd been used and they had left there, just kind of left it the way it was. They had come back in and was using it again, just recently. And we walked out into that and the medic saw my pant leg and, you know, I mean we were just swept? but he could tell that was, it was just dark. And he said man you've been hit. And that's when I first discovered it. And so I went over to the medical area they had and there were guys in there that were hit a lot worse than me. So I just jumped, I asked this chopper where you goin', they said, we're going to Phu Bai. I said, "Okay I need to go to Phu Bai." Just as I'm getting on that helicopter out runs this guy going "Ted! Ted!" That was my still photographer, he had a good night's sleep. I didn't know whether to shoot him or hug 'em 'cause I was happy he was alive. But these guys that I was with, I ended up picking up a weapon that night. I used it, but I don't remember much about using it. That's all I could tell you. But it was, it was a harrowing, harrowing evening. Hell, I don't know if they were lighting us up or lighting up the city of Hue but when anytime the mortar squad was firing, you know, flares, or flares were being dropped by C-130s, it was just, everything was silhouette. I don't know if we were being lit up more or if the NVA were, but they broke contact at about two in the morning as well. And we just walked the rest of the night until we got up the next morning. And I mean, I'm telling you I was just physically exhausted. And so we were at Hue and we're sitting over at the airport waiting for planes to come in and go out. Nothing was going in and out other than Marines were coming in from different areas. And it was a Marine hospital there and they were taking, I don't know if it was a hospital or medical unit of some kind. And they were taking care of those guys and finally I saw an Air America plane come in and I said, "Where you heading?" And he said, "Well we're going down to, down to Saigon." And it was a whole C-147 and in there were Montagnards and bunch of crap I don't know what it was but it stunk to high Heaven. And my ass hurt like crazy and my leg hurt, I didn't care. I mean, we were gonna get back, unbeknownst to us that's when the second mini Tet started happen. Breedlove got hit that same day, in Saigon. And we had four guys get hit that week. Hello.

Webb: I'm still here. I'm riveted. I have a lot of questions, I don't know how many of them to ask, but I guess.

Acheson: Ask anything you wanna ask!

Webb: I've talked to other people they say that in situations like what you've just described, their training kind of takes over. And, maybe, they don't remember everything, but that's what happens. Their training takes over. You described needing to stand up and take a, you know, a certain amount of time of, you know, footage that wasn't shaky. I just wonder in such a situation, is it your training that takes over?

Acheson: Yeah, your training—I think it's I think it's a number of things. Not only your training takes over, your brain also, you're thinking about, you're still thinking about composition, at that time. And then you're thinking about how does this cut with the shot with the shot that I'm gonna film next. I mean all of that's going on in your brain because you gotta think about the next shot, and the next shot. I mean, you just can't just, I mean, you gotta give them a different focal length once in a while, and, you know, give them a little bit of difference. I mean, a fire fight, like I said, that fire fight lasted five minutes. I didn't film five minutes' worth of fire fight either. You know, I mean, mine probably was thirty seconds, or forty seconds, or fifty seconds. I may have been longer with the cuts, it was probably a minute. But five minutes, fire fight was pretty incredible. I mean, it's all happening right in front of you.

Webb: Is there an impulse to put down your camera and pick up a weapon and defend yourself? I mean, you did say that—you probably picked up a weapon later on.

Acheson: Oh, I did. Oh, is there an impulse to do that? We were trained, and we were told, "You don't pick up a weapon until you have to pick up a weapon. Your job is to document what is going on, and if you need the weapon, you pick it up. Otherwise, you do your job," and that was to film. Otherwise, they're telling us, you know, if you don't do this, who, how are we ever gonna see anything? What went on in Vietnam? And you know, they're right. If you can't document what you're being sent there for, you know. It's a line. And I don't think many guys in our group ever had to do that. It's interesting. I mean, I didn't carry a weapon. I had no room for a weapon. I had a camera that was on my shoulder, okay. So I couldn't even carry a .45, had a battery belt going around your stomach. I couldn't carry this big camera and carry a sixteen [gun] with me and ammo pouch or anything. I carried film. So, you know, that was another thing. But there were, I mean, when guy got hit and you could tell they didn't need a weapon any more, you picked it up. And like I said, that's the only time I ever, ever picked up a weapon and I really have some blank spots about it so I don't know. Guys said they saw me shooting, I said, well, I don't remember it. I just don't remember it. Remember I just got hit too, I was blown out of a temple by a, what do they call them again, M78 [M79], one of their grenade launchers. I just, I mean I was still ding, a little dinged. I also had nothing to

drink, adrenaline was running crazy. There's a lot I don't remember that night. I can remember putting one foot in front of another, trying to stay behind, I figured tank tracks I would've hit a mine if I, you know. That was, you know, hell, if I fell onto a punji trap, those guys wouldn't even know cause they didn't know I was there. All of the guys that I talked to, you know, they said, "Yeah, yeah, we kinda remember camera men being there. But you know, you know, the time, we didn't. You, we didn't." And I said, "That's what I'm supposed to be, I'm supposed to be a ghost, if you will. Covering them."

Webb: Well, that, that actually, two questions that I had going into this interview. One: If there was ever any push back from some of the troops that you were filming; you know, for instance, the sergeant leaning against the tree wounded, you know, in those kind of circumstances, whether they saw that as an invasion of privacy or if they understood what you were doing and what your role was? And I guess that... go ahead.

Acheson: Well, I only had a, had, you know, filming wounded guys, filming dead guys, our guys, was tough. I mean, it was really tough to film. And then they have somebody call you an asshole or something, and then most of the guys would say, "Hey, he's one of us, he's Army," you know, and I was left alone. But they were, that was the only time I really had any hostility was that. Now, they were putting some guys on a helicopter and they didn't want me to, "Hey, give 'em some slack. You know, we want privacy, this man". You know, I still had to film the shot. It was what was happening. And, you know, guys got a little up-- I think if it was the press they probably would've, you know, knocked the guy on his ass. But somebody shouted, "Nah, he's Army, he's one of us." I was fine from them on. That answer that question, at all?

Webb: It did. The second question I have kinda coming from that is, you know, we live in a day and age when there's cameras all around us all the time. People have them in their pockets, basically, but we still sort of change our behavior when we know that we're being filmed. And I assume in an ambush situation like what you described, people are not paying attention to what you're doing. And you said that you were kind of like a ghost. But I wondered if you had any experiences where you did notice that people change their behavior or acted out when the camera was on them?

Acheson: Yeah, yeah, they did. And they did it in fun ways, generally. And they just screwing around, you know, it happens, they just like, just clowning around. But hell, that's basically at base camp, that's not out in the field. Nobody screwing around out there. And everybody's trying to cover their ass and get the job done. I mean, I got another, some more footage there that I sent to Ken on another job. And I was right behind the guys, I mean, literally right behind them, while they were filming, I mean, shooting. And I used them as protection, sad to say, but I did. I mean, I had nothing out there, you know. Neither did they, except, maybe a tree once in a while. And speaking of trees, in that footage, you can see them firing back at us, and you can see a tree right next to me, just like three or four shots where they rip the bark off, you know. From incoming. And

the problem with most of that footage I got, it's that it, I got what's called work prints. And they're crappy, unless you go back and buy the footage and run it through a digital system. Otherwise, it looks like, kinda like mud. But I've shown it to other people and they say, "Well, that's what we expected it to look like, it's from, well, 1968." So I, again the horseplay, yeah, always was horseplay, but out in the field like that, uh-uh. I'll give you an example. I got a hold, from that last job I was talking about where I was right behind the guys and stuff and the incoming coming in. We ran into a NVA division headquarters with one squad of cav. Which was like, I think, one tank and about eight APCs with .50 cal's [caliber] on 'em. And I found this guy's, where he lived and I sent him, I got his email from, again, through an association. A reunion. He sent me back an email and it said, "Ted," and a bunch of dots, "I have, I'm clearing my throat." He said, "I woke up this morning, first thing I do is turn on my computer and have a cup of coffee. And he said, "When I saw the images you sent me." He just said, "Holy shit." He said, "I gotta get back to you." He says, "I can't digest this right now." So that's the kind of reactions you get after so many years.

Webb: After the kind of situations that you would find yourself in and I'm sure many of the other DASPO guys, as well, what would you do to sort of decompress?

Acheson: Aye-yai-yai. Let me put the phone down for a second, okay? I'll be right back with you, I gotta hit the head, hang on just a second. One second.

Webb: All right, we are live again.

Acheson: Burt Peterson and I both went through Fort Monmouth. I got sent to Thailand, he got sent to Vietnam on our first assignments. Well, one of the things that Burt had to cover on his first assignment was Dak To and I believe it was Hill 875 where the 173rd was. It was really, I never saw the footage. Now most of the guys never saw the footage that I shot from the 101st the Thon La Chu footage. And they didn't see this other footage they shot with the 3/4 Cav with the 25th Infantry Division. And I had never seen Burt's. Now, I don't know if anybody had but when we had our reunion in DC about five years ago, we were up looking for our footage and one of us got Burt's footage and we started lookin' at it and hollered at him, he came over and looked at it with his. And it was sad, it was gruesome, it wasn't that I didn't see anybody get shot or anything, it was the amount of body bags that were stacked up. I mean, extremely high, I couldn't tell you how, maybe six, eight feet high. And they couldn't get the choppers in to get 'em out. So what they had to do was stand on the other body bags and hand them up to the guys in the chopper. Now, Burt never really talked much about, about that. And to anybody I knew, he was really quiet about it. And not many people knew what I went through either 'cause the footage was not available for screening for some reason and nobody saw it. One of the jobs—I usually critique the job—one job -- it got a critique but I never saw the footage. I never saw the footage until I got out of the Army. And then the same with the other one. Until I found it. Again, when we were in there, we were competitive,

but there were some things we just didn't talk about and I guess, you know, you never brag about that kind of a thing. And Burt really, really went through some hell on that one, I'll tell you it was harrowing. I don't know how many fire fights he saw, if any, or he just saw the aftermath. But either way, the aftermath was pretty bad. So, I just wanted to say, talk a little bit about the, when you see things like this, like somebody else's footage for the first time that you hadn't seen before affect you. That's it. That's all I got.

Webb: Okay. Well, we can talk about whether we want to pick up again and you know, the 5th would be fine for me.

Acheson: That would be fine. We can do it then. And pick up with that last question that you wanted to ask me that I didn't answer it.

Webb: I have a whole series of questions that I've written down, here. And of course, we're also interested in your career after the military because that's also very, very interesting so that would be, perhaps, a little bit lighter way to end the conversation.

Acheson: Yeah, and the other thing is the mortuary. That was the last job I ever did and it kind of ties everything together. [Interruption] We'll talk more next time.

Webb: All right.

Theodore "Ted" Acheson Part 2

Sept. 5, 2015?

Interviewed by Thomas Webb

Transcribed by Unknown

Edited by Eric Bradach & Leah Cohen

[2:56]

Webb: First of all, I want to say that I am so glad that you're here. We had, I think, a really great phone conversation weeks ago, it left a lasting impression. I've tried to convey to my colleagues here just how powerful some of the stuff that you were talking about truly was. So, it's nice to finally get to meet you in person and see the man behind some of those stories. I thought today, rather than doing kind of overview that we've been doing with some of the ones that we've not spoken to that maybe we'd just pick up and talk about the rest. So, when we left off we had just finished talking about the incident where you were awarded a Purple Heart, and I believe you said something about needing to go back and talk about an incident with two helicopters in...Thailand?

Acheson: No, it was in Korea.

Webb: Oh, that was in Korea?

Acheson: Yeah, and I'm not, you know, my first assignment was Thailand. Second assignment was Vietnam, I landed a couple weeks as we talked about, after the Tet Offensive started. And I got hit in, up in the Hue area in a battle called the Ambush at Thon La Chu. And after that battle was over I went to the Army hospital, got sewn up and then it was a bugger trying to find a plan getting back to Saigon 'cause everything, Saigon was closed down. That's where the, really the May Offensive, the Mini Tet as it's referred to really was taking place. I mean it, little places, but not like Saigon. They were really making an all-out effort again. And so we couldn't get an airplane back. Anyway, we ended up going back on Air America flight in and old ODC 47, or yeah, forty-seven I think it was called.

Webb: Where you still in a cast or?

Acheson: Oh, no, I was just sewn up that's all, just had stitches in me, and was covered up with band aids, or bandages, not band aids. And so I got hit in the butt and it came out my leg over here. And it was shrapnel, pieces of shrapnel from an American hand grenade. And, which had been thrown into a bunker, and it was a new guy that did it. And I'm sure I would've been in his same shoes wanting to get rid of that sucker as fast as I could. He didn't bother counting to one I don't think when he pulled the pin he just threw it. And so it hit in there and whoever was in there was smart enough to throw it back out and wounded several of the 101st Airborne guys besides myself. There was no way we were going to get a chopper back in there, the light was just about gone, at that time. So anyway, the next, I walked all night with that and I didn't even know I was hit. You hear people talk about that type of thing and it happens to you and it's kind of interesting. But okay, I take this old, what I call, DC3 CH 47 back to Saigon and this thing was just bumpy, crappy ride, and I was trying to find a position where I could sit and 'course every time I get a position, it hit an air pocket or something and it was a really bad ride. So anyway, get back to Saigon and you can see at the end of the runway it just all tracers and flames and everything, and that one picture of Harry Breedlove's with the sign that said, "Hell" on it. You could understand that happening earlier in the day 'cause everything was lit up and burning and they were trying to come in on the runway and the French Cemetery there that, they were, it was like World War II trench warfare 'cause between the places where people were buried there were moats all the way around it to divert water. So like in New Orleans, the water comes up and they had to be careful of coffins floating around and things. Anyway. I got back to the villa and I was asked how I felt about going out again. And I really had to stop and think about it, I was whipped, I was tired, and I said, "Look. I'll go out in the afternoon." And I went out that day and that was the seventh of May, eighth of May I was back out filming again and I was over by the old race track in Chợ Lớn. And that was a real bad area, four American

reporters were killed there the day before and I didn't even know about it. Well anyway, you know, after this trip I had a great trip with a guy named Bill San Hamel, Chuck Abbott, and a guy named Larson and we went to Taiwan, Okinawa, and traveled throughout Japan. There was a, I think we spent a week in Okinawa, two weeks in Taipei and then about six, seven weeks in Japan, covering different stories. So I got back, I was back about two, three weeks and we were told the [USS] Pueblo crew [that had been seized by North Korea] was gonna be released so we were sent to Korea. Well, we get other there and all of those negotiations had fallen through and it was like starting' over again. But so us just sitting around wasn't gonna happen so they sent us out on different missions. Well, a guy named Talmadge Harbison, Talmadge B. Harbison, a true southern gentlemen may I add, as far as I know. Anyway, Talmadge and I, he was a sound man and a still man. We flew up to a place called Samock Uljin? and I think it's s-a-m, o-c-k, u-l-c-h-i-n. And a hundred and thirty five North Korean commandos had to cross the border. And there were two American helicopters working with these guys, taking them places 'cause they were calling the shots. The first time the ROK Army [Republic of Korea Army] had conducted the whole mission by themselves. Otherwise, they were joint with the US and the US usually took the lead. This time, the Koreans took the lead. Again, I found a lot of footage of it. I found a lot of footage of mutilated North Koreans. But, we would go out with these guys and then we were told don't go any further. And all you heard was a lot of noises in the forests, and this was heavily forested, and this was like heavily forest- heavily mountain area in the north east corner of Korea. Almost 'til the ocean. And the mountains there were just, it was actually a beautiful area. So, we would have footage of them dragging these guys out of the forest. And it was not a pretty sight. None of them were alive, they didn't have anybody alive. They were alive, I believe, when they caught them or wounded. And they dragged them down to a village, to a truck, and I put identification on it. One of the interesting thing was as Talmadge says, "Do you remember that day you were filming and he ran down and bit the guy, tried to chew his heart out?" I said, "What are you talking about, Talmadge?" And I got that footage after that and I said, he was right. I did film it. And you could see the bite marks on the North Korean's chest. What he had done – had gone in and killed the family, stole the clothes and he was wearing this guy's brother's clothes. And that's what set him off. Well, okay, so this is all done. Dead bodies are being thrown into a truck with other dead bodies and off they go. We go back to helicopters that have been helping. And they're going back to base at start, you know maybe at four or five in the afternoon up in the mountains, it gets dark. So, I go to jump on the helicopter that we hadn't filmed all day. And Talmadge grabbed me, said, "Ted, let's stay with the guys, with the guys we were with." Said, "Okay." So, the first helicopter took off about twenty minutes before our helicopter was ready to leave for some reason. And they radioed back and they said there is just a gigantic snowstorm coming in off the coast. We're going to fly on top of it, and then come down and come back in. Which was probably a typical thing to do. So we're, we lift off and we're airborne, and I mean, this snowstorm is bad. And so what we're trying to do is fly around the mountains and in. And as we're

probably half way back to base they get a call that the voice and the radar image left and these guys are down in the ocean, they think. They never, they found one tiny little scrap of that helicopter about ten years after the, after they crashed. So anyway, I'm sitting in that helicopter thinking what the hell. Ya know, here I am out with North Koreans shooting at me, I'm out in this helicopter, one helicopter's already down, we're in a snow storm, we're running out of fuel. And I'm going, "Ya know this isn't good!" So we're huggin' these roads and things and finally we did find a road just as the light is what they call bingo. He had me on one set of skids, another, the gunner on the other side of the plane was on the other set of skids. And Talmadge was just watching the fuel gauge. And we found a road that went around a bend, and he was able to land that helicopter. They brought a fuel truck up, we fueled the chopper, and said do you wanna fly with us or go back with the fuel truck. And I said Talmadge, "I think we should go back in the fuel truck. I said, "I'm done flying for a while." So we went back and found out that nothing about the other helicopter, nothing had come in and man, it was real sad around that place. And here we are, outsiders listening to all this and, I think we grabbed a bite to eat, a sandwich or something hit the sack and took off the next morning. But it was really, the Pentagon was so happy to see this footage of activity like this in North Korea. Which hadn't happened since, probably, the end of the Korean War. And I'm thinking, here I am in Korea, supposed to be a safe place, and this happens. The families of the two deceased helicopter pilots I have talked to, I've sent them the footage that I had, and described what their, you know, because we sat them both down at lunch time and, you know, we interacted with the parents of these guys. Well, the one, one, one young man was maybe six months old, and the other boy was a year and half. And I've talked to them, and I've talked to their, to one of their mothers. And, and you look at these pictures of these guys and you know, when they were, really, I mean they were just like, they looked like they were twelve instead of twenty of twenty one. And I've kept in touch with that family, those families all of these years now.

Webb: You've talked a lot throughout both interviews of, you know, being able to share this footage in these kinds of circumstances. Has there ever been a negative reaction or somebody that just, "I don't wanna see that." Maybe you know, I would think that somebody that never knew their father probably has an image built up in their head. And, "Yeah, maybe I don't wanna see that, I just wanna keep thinking of him." Or has it always been, "Give me any kinda of..."

Acheson: I think everyone has said yes. Matter of fact, one guy in that Thon La Chu footage, I can't think of his name, off hand. He, you know, was a really nice guy to me as I was walking along and filming. I tracked him down about three years ago, four years ago. And his wife said, "No, he died in 1998." And I told her who I was with and what I was doing, and I was with that unit. And I said, "You know, your husband is a very brave man. "And I said, "I got a lot of footage of him, I even had outtakes. "And I said, "Would you like that footage?" And she started crying and she said, "You have no idea how much I'd love to

see that footage, and my children, and my grandchildren, can you send it?" I said, "Yeah, you have a DVD player?" "Yeah." So I send them a DVD. A lot of the guys that were in that firefight in Thon La Chu -- that was a catalyst for finding these people. And I even got a letter from a three star general who was a lieutenant colonel at the time and was a head of this group sent me a note. And said, you know "Ted, you're the guy that got us going." And Sam Berndt was the guy that did all the work finding all of these people. I think they found a hundred and sixty eight people and there was only maybe five that they knew of. And so that, showed that footage to people who had never seen before, In looking at their faces. I didn't look at that footage while it was being shown on a great big ole screen, I'm looking down at the people to see their reactions to it, and their wives' reactions to it. And after its shut off, looking at the reactions and interactions between the two, you know? Big hugs and things like that. It was just, for me you can't pay me enough for that kind of heartwarming response.

Webb: This was a question I have for the end, but I think but I think is appropriate here, is that maybe part of the lasting legacy of DASPO? That you get to show?

Acheson: I could be because one of the, recently this summer I showed another show that I had put together for the 4th Infantry Division, and I had another show that I put together for the 25th Infantry Division. Problem is, I had enough money from people that were backing me on the Thon La Chu project to be able to get that digitized. There's other things that I've put together to try and show them what it kind of looked like. And I said don't go by the quality on this, it's horrible. But if we get it digitized, it will improve it just greatly. And I said, I even had some of my old footage that I had saved and projected and had that digitized, maybe twenty feet of it. And it just, that footage still looked really good compared to what they had given me at the National Archives. And, of course, they only have five suppliers you can go to. And it does cost quite a bit of money. So anyway the 25th Infantry Division was my first fire fight. And one of the guys was captain, commander of this unit. And I put it all together and sent it to him and he says, "Well, basically that's the way he recalled it happening." And he, one of his comments was, "Man you got around!" I did, I knew you guys were here. He said, "But I didn't realize, 'cause a company of Infantry came in with us, which weren't with us the night before when we hit this NVA train division headquarters." So the next day I'm running around with these guys now 'cause they're going advancing into the jungle. And there was no real big, you know, they left maybe twenty, thirty snipers to hold us up. And yeah, there was some interaction between that but it wasn't like the night before when we were almost being surrounded by hundreds of NVA shooting RPGs, [rocket propelled grenades] they knocked out a tank, they knocked out an APC [armored personnel carrier] , they knocked out, as well. And they had two of their guys killed, forget how many wounded. Well, I flew in where they wanted to pick up the wounded and soon as I jumped off that helicopter, I mean the first thing that hit me was the

cordite, smell of ammunition being expended. And that smell, you just never forget that, so. That answer that question?

Webb: Sure.

Acheson: Okay, I'm just saying. The people there at their at that, it didn't go any further than this guy, nobody else got to see that footage, well, I don't think anybody really gonna, you know, and I try to get a hold of the guy that was their reunion head and put a call into him and never heard back from him. And then who else was it? Nothing there but the 4th Infantry Division film I did, I mean I was, I showed it to him at their reunion. Guys had never seen themselves in pictures like that since 1968, and they were just overwhelmed to see themselves and I think their - if they had brought their kids who were adults now, you know, had, when they saw it, "Is that you, Dad?" And I'm hearing stuff like that. And I had a lot of close ups of these guys cause they were part of it was a chaplain giving communion. And I behind him for those shots, we, givin' the host, and you looked into these guys eyes, you knew these guys had been through one of the worst nights of their life. And 'cause the place got overrun in one part of it. And they were bringing a cannon around, our cannons to shoot at us. And just before they got it twisted around they got hit with what's called a beehive round, you ever heard of one of those?

Webb: Well, you described it in the last interview but if you wanna do it again.

Acheson: Oh, that's—that's a round that has flechettes in it. And the flechettes look like, little circle with two pieces coming out of it that you would take and bend after you put it through a hole, to hold the whatever you were attaching in place. That's what was in it, but they were very small, and they would, they could send that out one hundred yards, five hundred yards, a thousand yards, and I don't even know, you know I think they just put it on the shortest they could and it took care of them. And they were able to take that position back. And those people at that reunion, they just love seeing that stuff, it's just great, so.

Webb: So, you're wounded on the seventh, and you go back out on the -

Acheson: No, on the sixth.

Webb: On the sixth, and then you go back out on the eighth. I know that when you're in country and you're going from assignment to assignment, you just do it. But was there ever any, you know, "Hey you just went through hell a couple days ago, why don't you go do an assignment that's a little bit easier?" Or is it just because all of this is going on you...

Acheson: Too, too much was goin' on at that time and everybody else was putting their, themselves in line of fire, and I didn't feel real good about going back out again but I did.

And it was kinda left up to me whether I wanted to do it or not, and I hate to say this, but when you're under fire you are, you are, the adrenaline's goin', and it was almost like an aphrodisiac getting this footage, 'cause not everybody, there's guys at DASPO that never was in close contact with the enemy. I mean with them firing back at you, and I don't know if you saw that footage from Thon La Chu, but you, you saw the dust and everything flying around where I was filming from. The adrenaline is really going in and it's, it was, from the standpoint of a photographer, it really intrigued me to get as best footage as, it may never ever happen again. I was out on lots of patrols, and, you know, I just got pictures of guy's boots walking through the jungle, there was nothing else there to do. Then things like, like the Tet that Mini-Tet happened. Well, I got back to Saigon and I got another letter from the Pentagon, "Great footage!" and "Dah dah dah dah." and it was just different. And I've never seen that footage, by the way. And yeah, I've spent weeks on the archives and labeling systems and everything crazy. But I think it becomes that. I was rewarded with my next assignment which was with Bill San Hamel and going to Japan. Hell we were all civilian status, it was great. Then I went to Korea, then I went to Vietnam two more times. And that's when I, the second time I was in Vietnam, you're going to interview a guy named John Gilroy, and he can tell you about these bait bases that were set up. Now did we get into that or not?

Webb: Well, a little bit, just mentioned, maybe.

Acheson: Okay, well a bait base was an artillery base that was set up. We think it was on the Vietnamese side of the Cambodian border by ten feet, or it could've been a quarter of a mile inside the Cambodian border, we're not real sure about that. First time they set up a bait base, and they had five 105 Howitzers in the star position. They had brought in the Army engineers and they had dug a big moat around with equipment. And that equipment got airlifted out. In the moat, was put what they called fugas? which was a mixture of airplane fuel and regular gas. And then they had canisters spread around in it of napalm. So while they're building all of this, there are other artillery units bracketing it. Knowing exactly where to fire if something happens. In addition to that, they had "Puff" up in the sky. Which if the viewer doesn't understand what Puff is, Puff was an airplane, could be many different types. That had two to four Gatling guns in it. And each Gatling gun within ten twelve seconds, could put a round in every foot of a football field. So, they also had concertina wire in the ditch and outside the ditch with claymores [mines] and everything else. And but they could see the North Vietnamese drive up in their trucks, I mean, so they knew they were gonna have a big assault. And the assault started typically two o'clock in the morning. And they came after 'em, they got to the wire, the ditch lit up, Puff saw what was goin' on and they started firing, artillery came in, and then these five cannons had the beehive rounds, and they would shoot a beehive, and they would shoot what was called white phosphorus. Now white phosphorus was not to be used as an offensive weapon under the Geneva Convention, it was only for marking. But we did use it, and we used it a lot. There were white

phosphorus grenade, too. It was nasty stuff, you get that on you and it'd burn right through you. So all of this was happening, all at one time. Well, the first time they did this they killed four hundred and fifty five NVA. And, you know, this was great, Fort Sill, Oklahoma, you know, was hearing about these things. So they set up another one, about two weeks later. And same results, four hundred and fifty five dead. So DASPO gets called, they wanna do a training film on artillery. And one of the things they wanna see is how to set up a bait base. So we get to go out and do it. And if you were able, I think John Gilroy, you need to segue to him, at this point, because make sure you ask him about the bait base and how much fun we had there. So the end of that job, there was myself, Tom Mintier and a guy named Joe Primeau, and John Gilroy was a pretty new, I think he was only a first, a second Lieutenant, at that time. He was getting kind of established in how DASPO did things, and he went to Brooke's College, Brooke's Institute of Photography. He had a good eye. He was a good friend. Again, we had an awful lot of fraternization with officers, and some of the senior NCOs and some of the officers did not appreciate that. But we were camera men, we were still photographers, we were, in one word, artists, I guess, and so were some of these officers that we worked with. And our whole idea was to do a good job. Not just go out and have a good exposure, but to go out and do something that would be dramatically different and cover the story. And John was one of those guys. So we got through with this, and we were out for weeks, I am tellin' you, I had never been so filthy, rotten in my life was when we got probably two thirds of that story done. It was just unbelievable, I've got photos of the helicopters coming down and you could see me, my back was to the choppers 'cause all the dust was coming at us. And John was a great guy to work with. And all of us that worked on this job, plus two guys that had nothing to do with the job got commendations from two generals. One in the Pentagon and one from Fort Sill about how great this job was. And John didn't get a, even a, ya know, "Atta boy." But his commanding officer in Vietnam, at the time, who never left the villa, I mean he, the only time he left the villa was to go get laid or something, that was it. And the other guy that was there, he was okay but John got ignored. I felt that was really a horrible thing to happen to him.

Webb: Is there anything you can do about that, after the fact?

Acheson: No, nothing. And then, I went back to Vietnam, a third time. And I had to cover a new tank that was brought in, called the [M551] Sheridan, and it was a light tank and it could be dropped from, supposedly from planes, and helicopters could move 'em and they were real light. And it was the first tank in the U.S. arsenal that ever could fire a round that you didn't have to eject the canister. It was a canister you just put in behind the round and fired. You can slap another round right in and fire it. The [M1] Abrams [tank] has got that, as well, so. But before you used to have, like with an artillery piece. Think of that, the shell comes back out, excuse me, the casing for the explosive part of the round comes back out and you eject it. And then you put the round in and then another,

another if you will, cartridge, or I forget what they call that part. Casing, the casing goes in. You fire, and have to eject it. Well, this tank you didn't have to do that. You just be able to put a round in and put this powder charge behind it and fire it. Put a round in, it saved a lot of time. The tank was horrible in Vietnam. But the guy had, the colonel of this unit, his name was Patton, he was a full colonel. Patton didn't even like us being there. And Congress had ordered this job to be done, not even, it came right directly from Congress. 'cause they heard all these rumors and investigating it. He was not happy. So we went out in the field and filmed it, and it couldn't climb up a berm this high. It stopped running while we were filming it. The radiator overheated because it sucked in all this underbrush. Terrible in Vietnam. But this tank was fabulous over in Israel. It worked great there. Because there wasn't any underbrush. And the slopes of the sand and everything were slopes, they weren't berms. And it was fabulous there. Well, this guy, when we got there, he said, "You're not to leave until I get that goddamn film." I go, "What in the world are you talking about, man?" "Ya know", he said, "You are not to leave here, you gotta come back and see me before you leave." Okay, Sir. Well, we could fly anywhere we wanted to. So we got on a helicopter that went to another fire support base and took it to somewhere where we could get another helicopter back to Saigon, or a plane. And we went back with the film. I bet somebody's butt got chewed on that one, but that was an interesting assignment.

Webb: Is that kind of why, you know, you guys were not as regulated as, so you did not have to go through that?

Acheson: Exactly, exactly, we were supposed to photograph what we saw. Non-bias, is what we were supposed to be. Now other units that came in and worked for the real Army, they had to do what they were told. And if they didn't, the film was destroyed, so who knows? But we did not have to, that was one of the greatest things with DASPO. We were not in the same chain of command of anybody in Vietnam, we answered to no one there.

Webb: Other than this one incident did that cause problems throughout or--?

Acheson: No, nobody ever, nothing ever happened, so. The hardest thing for a camera man, and I, I would walk into an office with a senior NCO above me, most of the time I was the team leader. I was pretty aggressive. So I go into an office, my NCO would be with me, the NCO would go up to the first sergeant and say, "We're here to see General So and So." "What the hell do you guys think you are coming in here?" I said, "Sergeant, the Pentagon has asked us to come here, and they're excited about filming General So and So." "Oh they are?" "Yeah," I said, "This'll be something that a lot of people will see." "Hey General, DASPO's here." Ya know, type of thing. Hey, I didn't even salute, I'd walk in and say, "General, how are you doin' today?" I said, "It's a pleasure to be here with you. And we've been asked to film you." And he said, "Well, I've been waiting for you guys." Ya know, it's like they all love to have their faces shown. And if anybody got

uptight about it, the worst person to go through was either the first sergeant or the command sergeant major to see the general. Yeah, I'd salute when I left, but, you know, I mean, "Hey how are you?"

Webb: Do you think personally, and this maybe is question I should ask everybody, but do you think personally that you're the way that you remember your experience in the military would be different if you had to go through all the rigmarole. Ya know, the saluting, the following.

Acheson: Absolutely, absolutely. And the other thing was, a good friend of mine is a, was a retired colonel and he was a real strict kind of guy. And he said, "Ted, how was it you were able to go in and see these generals and walk right up to them and do what you had to do?" He said, "Was it naiveté, or having a little bit, having big cojones?" And I said, "Well, I think it was a little of both." It had to be. I said it may be, been more naiveté than anything else but I used to never bothered me. I looked at them as another human being. Being like a corporate. He was the head of this part of this corporation. That's all how I looked at it. And they, to have a camera crew from the Department of the Army come in, these generals knew what that meant. Maybe, the sergeant majors or the staff sergeants didn't, but the general knew. And they all loved it except for Patton's son, that Colonel. There was nothing really ever good said about that man. So anyway, just take that with a grace of... so anyway I finished up my career. I'm trying to think of any other major jobs we did.

Webb: You've kind of skimmed over the [USS] Pueblo.

Acheson: Oh, I got one other thing too, let's do Pueblo. I know you can cut this. Let's do the Pueblo first, and I need to tell you about my last job. And I don't like to discuss it too much. It's very, very sad to me. So anyway the Pueblo crew. Well we were there doing other jobs, while we were awaiting for the captured crew of the Pueblo to be released. And originally they were supposed to have been released late September, early October. And something in the mechanics of what they were doing at Panmunjom, [North Korea] didn't work out. So they were back to the drawing board. So I was doing other jobs, I filmed the Bob Hope Show, and that was a whole farce getting in there to do that. We weren't even asked to do that. Though we used, one guy had no film in his camera. [Laughter] And we were right next to the stage. But anyway, I actually put film in it and paid to have it developed. But that was the Bob Hope Show, but right after the Bob Hope Show was, "You guys gotta get your cameras clean tonight and dah dah dah dah." So we knew. Next morning, we were at, I can't remember the medical facility. It was Camp Zama, [Japan] I can't recall. And we got them coming in on the helicopters. Getting off, they still had their POW clothes on. But they had nice big warm, I don't know if they were Navy or Army jackets, big heavy jackets. It was the twenty third of December, 1968, when they were released. And we got them going into the hospital. Now, this was probably the most pressure of anything for a young man. I was what,

twenty, I guess twenty three, twenty four. And I was picked as the cameraman that was going to work for the networks. I had to do a, I forget what they call that. You know, where they all use the same footage. 'Cause they didn't want press within a mile of these guys. They hadn't be debriefed or anything. Of course, the CIA had us come into a room and swear we weren't gonna talk to these guys. They'd whip us with rubber hoses or whatever if we'd spoke to them. Well, first thing somebody asked me was, "Hey, tell me what happened to Dick Tracey. Ya know, I was reading the comic books, and he was here doing this and what happened to him, you know?" It was comic section in the Sunday paper. I told the guy, I said, "Yeah, duh duh duh duh duh, but I'm not sure I haven't seen a lot of that lately." Another guy said, "Well, tell me about the World Series, did the Cardinals really win? That kind of thing. And I said, "No the Detroit Tigers won, sorry." But those are the kind of questions we were being asked, and we filmed them being taken in, and Captain Butcher was just unbelievable, he could hardly walk and he made sure everyone there had a bed before he went to his bed. We filmed them eating their first meal, I mean these guys didn't even know how to hold a knife and fork after having using their fingers or chop sticks, I guess. And I mean the people were there looking, I mean they stared at their food for the longest time. And there were some guys that just. Who [Laughter] Most of them stared at their food. It was two days of photography. The twenty forth they went, they were headed back to the States. We went back to our house that we had in Seoul, and downloaded all that film. 'Cause we had to catch a special flight Gimpo [International] Airport, [Korea], to Tokyo. This was the first time DASPO footage had ever been processed outside of a military processing, went to Red Stone, in the US or went to the Army Pictorial Center. So it was processed commercially in Japan. I'm sure, I don't even know, maybe they didn't have anybody looking over it and thinking somebody can actually make a copy of this. And this was sync sound, too, and at that time you couldn't, I couldn't move more than probably four, five feet from the sound man. He had to follow me everywhere. And the lighting in this hospital, they had incandescent lighting, they had lighting coming in from the outside, they had florescent lighting. All mixed together. And one of the things, you know, we were taught was color temperature, you know. Crap, how do you expose for this stuff? I just exposed the best I could and, you know, you're supposed to put certain filters on your camera if it's gonna be in florescent, and we did that, but man, it was tough. 'Cause a lot of the things we were doin, was you were always in motion. I had a tripod, I was on shoulder mount, yeah. Am I getting' this exposure right, am I focused, all? This was it, this was history. And all of that was going in my mind. Composition. It was really kinda heavy getting' this all done. So we went back, wrote our captions out, typed them out. And got the film all ready, mount rolls, and we put the camera reports on each one of the reels, and then Tom Mintier and I drove it out to Gimpo Airport. And about a mile or two before we got to Gimpo, now we're driving a deuce and a half, no heater in the damn thing, really, and it's snowin' and you know I said, "Tom," it was now about eleven o'clock at night. And I said, "Tom, this was the greatest Christmas I've ever had." It really was. And he said, "Isn't it?" Seeing those guys being able to get home. And they were

home for Christmas. And that was a really great feeling. So that was the last job I remember doing before I flew back to the States. And again, I got all kinds of commendations for that. And I mean, I was just doing what anybody else would have done in our group. So, anybody could've done that job. I mean it was just, I just happened to be in the right place at the right time. Now, can I get a drink of water?

Webb: Absolutely.

Acheson: We'll talk about something that I really don't talk a lot about with people. Most of my neighbors never even knew I was in the military. Ever. I never talked about it.

Webb: It is one of the things that I feel the best about having worked, here. Is maybe you pay attention to, depends on somebody's hat as you're walking down the street or something. You just never know. And...

Acheson: Well, I never, I never talked about it, basically, because most of the people that I lived around were probably privileged in their life and they didn't have to get drafted during the Vietnam War, or they were in the National Guard and got out of it, somehow. So I never spoke too much about it. I had a neighbor, I got something, some kind of an award from something here just two years ago. And he said, "Well, I didn't know you were in Vietnam. I didn't know you were in the military." And he said, "How come you never told us, we went, we went on boat trips together, boy scout jaunts," And all this stuff, cause both our kids were in scouts, and we'd go on all these trips and, I just said, "There wasn't anybody in our scout unit that went to Vietnam." And I think, personally, didn't think anybody would, could understand unless you'd been there. So, I just learned to never speak about it. The last job I did was a few days in the Saigon mortuary. And you're gonna talk to a guy named Stuart Barbee and Stu really just about went crazy. He was there, he was working in the Army Pictorial Center. Stu had previous motion picture experience, so they sent him with a script, and put him in DASPO Pacific then instead of CONUS [Continental United States]. And he went to Vietnam and his job was to film this. They had nothing in Fort Lee, Virginia, where the mortuary school is about. They had no idea that there were going to be this many people coming through a mortuary. And all these people had to be embalmed to be sent back to the States. Some had to have a, what's that called, where they look and see why the cause of something, what is that called, people die they do a...

Webb: Autopsy?

Acheson: Autopsy, thank you. The other thing that they did at these mortuaries in some cases, not knowing how a person may have died, they would do an autopsy. In addition to that, we had some that we called shake and bake. Shake and bakes were the guys that were in a tank or an APC and got hit by a RPG and just shrapnel and burnt up and then we had crispy critters. All those things were in there. Well Stu, Stu is an excellent camera man. So he had to go and start this job. They'd send a still photographer, and they might even

send an officer over there, occasionally, to be with him. Most of the officers had nothing to do with it, they didn't want to be there. So I kept hearing about it, and hearing about it from other guys what it was like, and this was sixty... I guess sixty-nine. And so I didn't have to do it, I didn't have to go over there. And went back to Hawaii, my last job was back to Vietnam again. And that fall, early fall, late summer, Stu was no longer on that job and they had to do some reshoots and different angles of things, and I got my opportunity to go over there and light this and film these guys, embalming them, and shoot what was left of whatever was there. And you know, your, you look down this row of slabs, metal slabs, and you see these guys, all this gray. All of them have got their eyes open and all of them are gray. And some guys have been in the river, their skin is all peeled off. It was really terrible. And I did two days there, and a couple of days in where they reclaimed the personal effects, and I mean they went through stuff of, pictures of their girlfriend nude, and they would just throw that stuff out and send back, sometimes, they even took the diaries and threw them away. I know Grigsby grabbed one of the diaries, and it was really heavy, what the guy had written down, about the time he was in Vietnam. There wasn't anything in there that they should have thrown it away for. But they just did. And that had a, that has had a lifelong lasting effect on me. And I was pretty good cameraman. And I was named, unbeknownst to me, as the Department of Defense Cameraman of the Year for 1969. I got that in April of '70. My parents kept saying, "You got something here from the Department of Defense." I says, "It's just more crap, just leave it alone, I'll get at it when I come home," No, this stuff, you had, you want us to open it? I said, "No, I don't want you, just leave it alone, it's just junk." You know, I said I don't have to do anything, I served my time, just leave it. I got home and opened that up, I just about fainted. Getting' that award. Only two guys that I know of got that award for cinematography. Now still-wise, they've quite a few guys got it. But for cinematography, myself and another guy that's gonna be here, his name's George Stevenson, he's about four, five years younger than me. And he's still shooting big motion pictures. He shot *The Terminators*, he's still working, one of the reasons he couldn't, he isn't here, was 'cause he was workin'. Now Stu Barbee was another guy that worked on a lot of TV series, he did a lot of, oh gosh, what would that be, 60 Minutes type things? He's a really good, good cameraman. A lot of us stayed in the field. I mean I was producing car commercials and directing them for GM, and Honda, and Acura, and little bit for Ford, and a little bit for Chrysler. I even hired Mickey Mantle to work with me for two days, and that was terrific. But all of that was able to help me get through the, you know, stay in the business without having to get behind there. This film, now. It's not digital. I mean, you had a viewfinder, a huge viewfinder, you had to put your face into it. Looking at a screen and settin' up a shot now, you know, I'm just looking at monitors and setting up the shot, and looking at the lighting and things. I'm okay with that. It's just when I get a camera shoved in my face, it brings back a lot of, and again, it was the last job I did while I was in the Army. I could've gone out on anything else but that. And I am absolutely shocked, and I used to make fun of Stu Barbee because he truly had PTSD, or has PTSD and it took me a long time to understand what PTSD was,

how it affected people, and every time I, I'll tell Stu probably yet tonight and give him a hug and say, "Man." He'll tell you that I keep saying to him, "I'm sorry that I didn't really understand and I was, sometimes, not as kind to you as I could have been." But I took him out of the mortuary, and I got him a job that we both went on for a week on an island outside this, they never had VC on this island. They never had NVA on that island. And we were set up to work there for a week and it rained every single day. Now that job was great, but we never broke out the camera gear. And the last day, of course, that we finally said we gotta go back. Guess what? Sunshine comes out, never, we never shot one foot of footage. And Stu loved it 'cause he got to sit back, read, and I remember I was finishing up the *Lord of the Kings*?

Webb: *Rings*?

Acheson: *Rings*, yeah. And, Tolkein, and he was starting **The Hobbit**, and he got into what I, I think I had three books, anyway, it was a great vacation for him to get the hell out of the morgue. And he, like I say to him, "Stu, you know, I'm sorry." And he'll say, "Don't worry about it, man. You got me out of the mortuary for a week." So, I kinda laugh at that, Stu will tell you, people that work in that mortuary have had real problems since they left. And we don't, people don't necessarily have nightmares, they have what's called "daymares," so you'll be driving along and all of a sudden you're thinking about something, and you see faces, and it's those faces on those slabs. So, you know, I mean, we had good times, we had just fabulous times, we had great things to shoot. I mean I was proud of what I did in Vietnam. I think all of us were proud of what we did in Vietnam. Not many of us really thought about what we were doing would be so significant [that] I'd be sitting here talking to you today.

Webb: Well, because you are here sitting with me. The Museum and Library is absolutely honored to be doing this exhibit, to be speaking with all of you. What is it that you would like the community to know?

Acheson: Here's something that I always felt that... and I do it, as well, and you'll do it as well. When you look at a picture, or you see a piece of documentary footage, you get caught up in the photography of the... of the still photography. When you go to a movie or a documentary, you get caught up, and you stop thinking about things, and you just watch. But I always tell somebody: there's somebody behind that camera that took that picture. Here's somebody that risked their life, so that could be documented and shown. And that's what I want people to think about. Think about what the man did, what he had to do to get to that point of being able to take that photo. And sometimes it's... even with nature photography, or whatever, you might be humping your camera for two miles, or half a day even, and you set up for three or four days to get one picture. The same thing happens with the old film, motion picture cameras, it was the same way. Thank God the equipment got lighter and more compact, and you can do a lot more, but it's the guy that's behind the lens that gets that shot, and think about what he had to go

through to get that photo. I think that's what I'd like to leave with a viewer, somebody that's watching this. Just think about that.

Webb: I can't imagine --

Acheson: Anything else?

Webb: -- a better note to end the... I would just say, from a personal standpoint... and whether this makes it onto the recording or not... I hadn't, before any of this, I hadn't really... I mean I'd seen some of the picture before, they're iconic, but you don't stop to think about exactly what's going on, exactly as you said.

Acheson: It could be somebody behind you that... and this is going into combat photography, now that I'm talking about it. You have to be aware of where you are, 'cause you want to be able to be able to get this job back, but yet you've got to put yourself in harm's way to get this job finished. And there's a lot of things that you're thinking about. I had...this will crack you up... I had an officer say to me, "How come I only see the backs of heads here? Why aren't I seeing faces?" And it was a combat job! And I said, "Well, Sir, how would you like be looking at people shooting over you, and turn around, and there's people shooting at you." I said, "Nobody gets pictures..." If you see a picture of some guy running and firing, it's either fake, or the cameraman's probably dead. One of the two. I said, "It doesn't happen that way." It's funny how people... yeah," Well, you guys didn't get any faces! How come you didn't get a close-up of his face?" Well, it's pretty hard when you only see the back of his head! But you can't... if you do that, you got to be insane, or stupid, and I don't see that many insane or stupid cameramen doing that.

Webb: Okay, is there anything else that you.

Acheson: Not really. But DASPO was the greatest... other than my marriage, and having three children, I think DASPO was the greatest thing that could ever happened in my life. It taught me an awful lot. It taught me a lot about being self-reliant. We had to go out on jobs. My second job I had in Vietnam after I went out with Harry Breedlove, and he trained me pretty well, just the days... I had to go out with somebody that had never been out in the field before. So I'm taking somebody new out. I knew how to get to a place, getting back was always the hardest thing, and I was always... had somebody... I even had one sergeant who was, I think I was an E4 and he was an E7. He didn't even know how to load a camera properly! He'd never... he'd bluffed his way through and it was a new Aeroflex out He said: "You use that, I'll use the Filmo," which was an old crank thing. It was interesting... an interesting group of people. They kind of... I mean we had to make decisions. We were E4's, E5's, we're making decisions that maybe a captain, a major, a lieutenant-colonel should be making. But we're making those decisions, and we were taught how to make those decisions. Our esprit-de-corps was unusual, because we all were trying to do the job the best we could, and some of us

were very competitive. And it was always when the footage would come back, the biggest compliment was: "Wow, man, did you see that shot?" Right there, it made your week.

Webb: One other thing. What is this, your fourteenth, fifteenth reunion?

Acheson: Fifteenth, I think.

Webb: And that's maybe not so unusual, but it's kind of unusual, that you guys would all get together year after year. What is it about--?

Acheson: Our guys?

Webb: Yeah.

Acheson: The camaraderie?

Webb: Yeah, the family aspect of it. It seems like you guys are a big family.

Acheson: That's basically... it was a family. I mean, we lived in close quarter with each other, we got to know each other—we got to be lifelong friends with each other. We kept communicating, most of us kept communicating with each other. With Bill, for example, he stayed overseas for a little while, and when he got back, I don't know, maybe two... maybe five, seven years after I got back, he and I made contact. Chuck Abbott and I continue to be friends. Barbee and I continue to be friends. Bob Smith, we continue to be friends. John Gilroy worked for me! Okay, you got a minute? Can I do one more? This is great.

Webb: Absolutely.

Acheson: John Gilroy, who was a first lieutenant, I think, when he got out of the Army, I worked with - my tennis partner and great friend, and just a good buddy. When I got into business in the car industry, I sold a show to Chevrolet, that we would take this show to nine different locations. And dealers from those areas would come in to see this new product, and to tell them a lot about the new product. So we had to do a... back then you had maybe three projectors on top, and three projectors on the bottom. And they didn't even have projection video yet, so it was all slides, and you had to keep these slides moving. Well, I didn't know how to do that, and John was in Kalamazoo and I was in Detroit, and I call up John and, "Hey, you ever done anything like that?" He said: "Yeah, I have!" And I said: "Well, you want to work on another show?" And this thing was one of those shows that just keeps bitin' you in the ass and never let's go. So, we... I helped get the script written. The guy that was writing the script held my boss up, and he wanted all of the money up front, and he wouldn't turn over the script, and that was one thing. So, we didn't even know what pictures went with what, so we couldn't go out and do photography! We finally get the script, we finally see what we got to do. John

also did the photography on it. Then the next thing we did is we had to kind of assemble the slides, and figure which was going where, and it just continually moved. It was all done with a tape, that had holes in it, and as you wanted the first slide, you hit button A1. Second slide to come up was button A2, A3. Then, the next slide that would come up, if it was under one of these other projectors... it may not have been under the same projector, it might have been in the middle, then you would go 2A4. This tape just rolled out, and that was what ran... you put it back in again, and it would tell all the projectors what to do. If a slide hangs up... now this was all rear projection, okay? So we got these projectors back there and everything. We get down to Atlanta for our first show, and the slide projector hangs up. The tape hangs up. The machine was burnt out. Then, they fly a guy in with a new machine. It didn't work either. I'm going, "Oh, man." When we were putting this thing together, we got no sleep for four or five days. And John, when I finally got it put together in Detroit before we took it out to show the people in Detroit how it all went together, John was there looking at the screen. Just standing, sound asleep with his eyes open. I mean I could do this and this. Didn't even know that was going on. Sound asleep. I'd never seen a man sleep with his eyes open before. That's how tired we were. I finally got to sleep and I dreamt about the show. When I woke up in the morning, I said: "You know? This is the damndest thing. When I can go to sleep, I can think about the show. When I'm awake and doing the show, I think about sleep." Anyway, that projector went out... or computer. So, we had the board there, and we had written down what - all of the things. It was like a score from a musical or something. The guy that they sent down... and this is a company that San Hamel worked for, and I can't think the name of it, it was a national corporation. He was there, and he played it like a piano. It went... basically, maybe a couple slides may have gotten hung up... we went up... hell, the audience had no idea... it went off great. [Sigh of relief] The guy that I worked for at General Motors got his boss and brought him back and said: "These are the guys that..." "Oh man, great job! Fabulous." This was his boss's boss. He said: "By the way, Boss." He said: "It's pretty good, 'cause the computer went out, and these guys just did it by hand." And this guy just went white. The next stop, they had another computer sent. From there on, all the shows went fine. But John, John and I probably aged five years. My point is, all of these guys you're asking about camaraderie and things, we just kept in touch. Tom Mintier, when I was in college, working on my master's, he came over with his wife, and his wife said to him: "Why don't you, instead of working on a Coca-Cola bottling plant, go back to school?" And he did, and he went back and got his broadcast degree. He was one of the top broadcasters with CNN. He was a bureau chief of London, and he won a couple of Emmys. We stayed in touch all of that time. One of the other guys that was in the group was a lieutenant, and he went back, got his PhD, and he became the head of the theater department at the University of Louisville. An amazing group of people! Then, these people were maybe in touch with somebody else. So it was kind of a network, and we always knew where everybody was, in a way. It was a family. I look back at it now, and we were one large family, we really

were. I think everybody was appreciative of everybody else that was there. Maybe not at the time.

Webb: Like a family.

Acheson: Yeah. And we [like] glue kind of stuck together. Couple of other things. Yesterday, we were talking about stuff, I said, "Do you think this minutiae that we're talking about, would we ever talk about this crap, twenty-five years, thirty years, forty years ago? No." But now we do.

Webb: Well, we're glad that you are.

Acheson: Thank you. And what's so great is finding all these guys, I'm telling you. I'm going to talk at our dinner, and I'm going to tell the guys what that does for you.

Webb: Well, thank you, Sir.

Acheson: It was a pleasure working with you guys.