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AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN S. DANIEL, JR.

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WILL ROBINSON: This begins an interview with John S. Daniel, 30th of June, 2009 with Will Robinson and ...

JOHN S. DANIEL, JR.: Lieutenant Colonel John S. Daniel, USA [U.S. Army], retired.

ROBINSON: Sir, let's start off by talking about your early life and where you were born.

DANIEL: I was born in Clarksville, Tennessee, 306 Madison Street ... and someone from my family has served in the armed forces for the United States in every war in U.S. history. My father was a major in the United States Army Judge Advocate Corps and served with the U.S. Army in Europe as a member of the Judge Advocate Corps in France.

ROBINSON: When you were growing up you were already exposed to the Army, was that something your father shared with you a lot?

DANIEL: Yes sir, and we prized in our home the accoutrements of his uniform. They were always kept in an honored place. And my maternal uncle served as a master sergeant in the U.S. Marine Corps. His name was Van Conner Kincannon ... and he was from Tupelo, Mississippi. He served at the battle of Verdun in World War I, 1916-1918. [Kincannon was part of the 4th Marine Brigade which served in the Verdun sector in 1917 attached to the French 2nd Army. Later the unit was transferred to the Marne sector and fought in the battles of Belleau Wood and the Meuse-Argonne.]

ROBINSON: When he [Daniels' uncle] came back from the war ... did he talk about it at all?

DANIEL: He did. He shared with me vignettes of combat. Those were the days of trench warfare. He talked to me a good bit about how they had to dig the deep trenches and when they fought battles ... they charged across open ground to engage and destroy the German army. Also, I forgot to tell you that I had ... [family that fought] during the Revolutionary War. I don't recall all their names, but ... they fought in the in the United States Army against the ... [British]. And they were in service during the War of 1812, and after that, during the Civil War, my grandfather and father both served in the 14th Tennessee Infantry Regiment of the Army of Northern Virginia under General Stonewall Jackson. He fought in all engagements fought by that unit. And then after the surrender at Appomattox he got out of the army and returned to be a peaceable citizen in Clarksville, Tennessee where he practiced as a lawyer in that city. He was [law school] graduate of Austin Peay state college ... He lived on Madison Street.

ROBINSON: So growing up in the Daniel family, these stories of all your relatives and ancestors that served in the army, was that something that was talked about a lot, maybe around the dinner table? How did you learn all these stories?

DANIEL: Yes. My father and my uncles all discussed their combat experiences ... locations, and I was always taught that the most honorable thing a man could do, would be to serve to defend their country. They shared with me all their items, well, the accoutrements of military [service]. I had an uncle from Chattanooga, Tennessee who was a judge at U.S.—I think it was a circuit court judge. His name was Will Frierson, F-R-I-E-R-S-O-N. He lived on Lookout

Mountain in Chattanooga. And my uncle on my mother's side, his name was Van Conner Kincannon, C-O-N-N-E-R K-I-N-C-A-N-N-O-N ... He was a newspaper reporter and lived in Tupelo, Mississippi.

ROBINSON: You had all these family members, uncles, and they'd shared their combat experiences with you. When you were a little kid, what were you thinking? Were you in awe of these guys?

DANIEL: Absolutely. They were all my heroes. And I was determined to serve my country, if our country ever went to war. I used to—when they came to visit or when I visited them, we would spend hours talking about their combat experiences.

ROBINSON: Would you go play army and play soldier and try to ...

DANIEL: Yeah.

ROBINSON: Did it ever scare you hearing them talk about their combat?

DANIEL: It scared me, but I felt determined, I felt it my duty to serve my country and I always wanted to go to military school. After the death of my father, who died of a heart condition, I was sent to Castle Heights Military Academy in Lebanon, Tennessee, as a ward of the state. [Daniel's mother, Nell T. Kincannon Daniel, had died in 1932.] And I spent four years as a cadet. I graduated as a cadet first sergeant.

ROBINSON: What was a cadet first sergeant? What did you have for that?

DANIEL: I had to form all my company, Company C, for reveille, and for each meal formation, and for drill and ceremonies. And see that they were drilled properly.

ROBINSON: So, you were one of the top leaders of the older students?

DANIEL: Yeah, I was the first sergeant of the company.

ROBINSON: So, you were sent there by the state. Was going to the military school something you would've wanted to do anyway?

DANIEL: Yes. They paid for my going to school.

ROBINSON: So after that four years how prepared were you? How prepared did that make you later on when you got into the military, did that four-year military school help?

DANIEL: It did, and I was very much desirous of going into the service. The commandant of that school was Colonel Dan T. Ingram, I-N-G-R-A-M, and he had been a graduate of Virginia Military Institute. He convinced me that I should not go to a civilian college but should go on to serve my country as an officer in the United States Army. And that's what I did. I entered the Virginia Military Institute in September, 1951.

ROBINSON: Before he had talked to you, did you already have a conception of where you wanted to serve? Did you already know it was going to be the army and infantry or were you still ...

DANIEL: Army and infantry.

ROBINSON: Already in high school you had ...

DANIEL: Had determined that that was going to be my desire. I had wanted to go into the Marine Corps, but my eyes were not good enough for me to pass the physical for going into the Marine Corps, so I went to the next best infantry unit I could go to. So, I determined I'd be in the U.S. Army and once I was in the army, I went to airborne school and then to ranger school.

ROBINSON: Why infantry? Why was that attractive to you as opposed to quartermaster officer or ... (Laughter)

DANIEL: 'Cause I believed it was my duty to close with, and kill or capture my enemy, and not to be a rear echelon individual. There are a couple other words in there but I won't use 'em.

ROBINSON: Yeah, I know what you're talking about. (Laughter) So, when you got to VMI, having heard all these stories about the Civil War and your relatives who had fought under Stonewall Jackson—with VMI's really long and storied history of individuals who went there, were your eyes and your jaw just hanging open to be there?

DANIEL: Absolutely honored to be there. Again, I served as a non-commissioned officer in the cadet corps.

ROBINSON: At VMI?

DANIEL: At VMI. I think I was a corporal and rose to the rank of first sergeant of Company C of the VMI Corps of Cadets.

ROBINSON: At this time did they have majors at VMI, or did everyone ...

DANIEL: Yeah, I was a history major. And I took what amounted to a course in military history at VMI.

ROBINSON: What are some of the things about VMI that stand out to you today?

DANIEL: They had a parapet which overlooked the gymnasium and then they had Stonewall Jackson's cannon that were emplaced on the parapet overlooking the courtyard beneath. Those cannon were named after Stonewall Jackson's cannon; Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John because they always spoke the truth, as did VMI cadets. We had SMI, Sunday morning inspection, every Sunday morning. We were attired in our dress uniform, our shako, which is a tall, black hat, and

our coatee, which is a tight-fitting upper garment with three rows of buttons going up and down the front and three rows of buttons on each sleeve.

ROBINSON: How serious were these inspections? Were they ...

DANIEL: Primarily as serious as you could possibly get.

ROBINSON: Are we talking white gloves ...

DANIEL: White gloves, coatees, and web belt around your waist with cross dykes [web gear] and a breastplate on the front; cartridge box on the waist that was buttoned together with the cross dykes, and a bayonet. And your U.S. Army-issued weapon, white gloves, and your shoes were highly shined.

ROBINSON: What would happen if you failed inspection, or if something was out of order?

DANIEL: You had to walk penalty tours.

ROBINSON: What was that?

DANIEL: You had to spend one hour for every demerit that was assigned walking ... in the courtyard or on the bricks as it was called, the area ... on the parapet. Or walking down penalty tour road, which was a road that followed what we called "the Nile," which was a river that flowed behind VMI.

ROBINSON: Did you ever have to do penalty tours?

DANIEL: Yes sir, I did a considerable number of them.

ROBINSON: What would you think about while you were walking for so long?

DANIEL: Soldiering and girls.

ROBINSON: (Laughs) Yeah, that's a good way to pass the time.

DANIEL: Yeah.

ROBINSON: When all the corps cadets had to do these inspections, did the cadres, or the leadership, were they really emphasizing things like discipline and attention to detail?

DANIEL: Absolutely.

ROBINSON: How else did they do that, did you guys get lectures a lot from ...

DANIEL: Yeah, from the Department of Military Science. We had MS classes two days a week in the afternoons. The classes would last at least one hour, sometimes two hours, depending on what particular subject it was.

ROBINSON: Now this was the 1950s, how worried was everyone about the USSR and ...

DANIEL: Extremely worried about the USSR.

ROBINSON: When you guys were doing your military studies and your drills, did you feel like you may, any day, be needed to be called into service by your country?

DANIEL: We were told that. We were told that we would go on active duty and that could happen at any time. So, we had to be in good physical condition and had to be mentally astute to what might happen.

ROBINSON: Now, you were also there during the Korean War.

DANIEL: Yes sir.

ROBINSON: What were they saying about Korea? And, the cadets, what did you guys think about that?

DANIEL: Well, of course the Koreans and the Chinese were pawns of the Communists. So, we were mentally prepared to fight the Chinese communists, which in our eyes were worse than the Russians, or the North Korean Army, which was ... not as strong as the USSR. And the USSR, of course, was more prepared to strike our nation than the Korean army. But we had to be prepared especially to close with and kill our enemy. We felt that the ChiComs [Chinese Communists] and the North Koreans were very fierce adversaries, and because of the fact that they had centuries of experience that they would be very fierce enemies. We did not have any racial prejudice ... Orientals didn't bother us. The fact is we had Orientals who were cadets at Virginia Military Institute. There was never any racial prejudice shown at that school, at all.

ROBINSON: Were there African American students there?

DANIEL: There were.

ROBINSON: When you guys heard about the human wave attacks and the tactics the North Koreans and Chinese were using, what were your instructors telling you?

DANIEL: Well, they told us that number one we had to be able to shoot straight, tell the absolute fact and truth of our engagements in battle or on patrol or facing the enemy as they conducted the human wave attacks, and to maintain communications. We had at that time ANPR-C6, ANPR-C7, [hand held] and ANPRC-10 [portable, backpack] radios. And we were taught how to operate those radios and the procedures to give reports during those contacts, and then all the basic tenets of scouting and patrolling.

ROBINSON: That was one of the first wars where helicopters were used to transport troops.

DANIEL: Yes sir.

ROBINSON: Do you remember what you thought when you first heard about helicopters?

DANIEL: Well, it was an exciting type of thing. Later did I realize that I would be actually employed in combat using them. And, of course, I was deployed and I had at least two engagements in combat where I was deployed by helicopter.

ROBINSON: Okay. As time for graduation from VMI came around, did you get a choice to choose infantry, or was it luck of the draw? How did that system work?

DANIEL: Well, I wanted to go into the Marine Corps, but my eyes were bad when they tested them and so I had the choice of going either in the Army or the Navy or the Air Force. I, of course, took as my family tradition was to fight in the infantry. My desire was to close with and destroy my enemy. I had instruction in tactics and scouting and patrolling.

ROBINSON: How many of your fellow classmates chose to go into the army and into the infantry?

DANIEL: I would say one hundred percent

ROBINSON: That's what everyone wanted to do?

DANIEL: Yes.

ROBINSON: Were people upset when they didn't get chosen to go into the infantry? Or did that even happen?

DANIEL: That didn't even happen. We all went into the infantry—well, no, we also had the choice of armor or artillery, or one of the RM branches. If we couldn't qualify physically, we could go in the Quartermaster Corps or Ordnance. But one hundred percent wanted to go in the infantry.

ROBINSON: Did you play any sports, or were you involved in any extra-curricular things at VMI?

DANIEL: Yeah, I ... played football during the fall. There was one hundred percent participation in sports. I tried out for it, but did not make the varsity football team, but ... as the brigade was organized we had company intramurals, and I played on the Company C football team. We played football without pads.

ROBINSON: Was the competition really fierce between companies?

DANIEL: Extremely fierce. At the end of the year the teams from each battalion—we had two battalions at VMI, each with three companies in it, and there were individuals who were chosen on the all-star team from each of the two battalions. I was chosen to play in what was known as the “blood bowl,” which is an intra-battalion football team where we played tackle football without pads. So, I played on the 1st battalion “blood bowl” team. (Laughter)

ROBINSON: That’s tough.

DANIEL: It was very interesting. (Laughs)

ROBINSON: A lot of the military ...

DANIEL: And I did run on the varsity cross country team.

ROBINSON: Okay. So everyone had to do something?

DANIEL: Right.

ROBINSON: It’s still the same way now, at school. What was VMI’s big rival? Did they have a rival?

DANIEL: Virginia Tech.

ROBINSON: Virginia Tech?

DANIEL: We had a little cheer that we gave, “Rah, rah, ree, kick ‘em in the knee! Rah, rah, rass, kick ‘em in the other knee!” “Tech, Tech, Blacksburg High. Solareck, Solari. To hell with Tech, VMI! Pig, pig, pig, pig sooie!” But VPI [Virginia Polytechnic Institute, shortened in the late 1970s to Virginia Tech] was a fine school as well. We had a feeling of honor and competition between the two schools.

ROBINSON: Now, there weren’t any girls at VMI at this time. What ...

DANIEL: No sir, there were not.

ROBINSON: What did you guys do for—did you have any interaction with girls from local schools?

DANIEL: Yeah, there was a girls school that was called Southern Seminary, which was located in the valley some distance from VMI. But there were a lot of people that did what they called “run the block,” that is, after taps at night we would go climb down the walls of the Institute barracks into what was called the ‘Nile Valley.’ The Nile was a little creek that ran behind VMI. And we would run the block. We’d slip out and climb down the walls. We’d take our sheets off our beds and tie ‘em to make a make-shift rope and repel down the side of the wall into the Nile Valley, and then go out and hitchhike from there. Some of the cadets had automobiles, and they would make up a car-load of individuals to go wherever we intended, whether it was Southern

Seminary, or Charlottesville, or to [the] Washington, D.C. area, where we would meet with young ladies who were from the different schools around the area.

ROBINSON: Did you have any steady girlfriends in college?

DANIEL: No, no steady girlfriends in college.

ROBINSON: How proud was your family when you graduated?

DANIEL: Sufficiently proud that they drove all the way up from Mississippi to see me graduate.

ROBINSON: Was that a big occasion?

DANIEL: It was.

ROBINSON: Did they have any traditions during graduation?

DANIEL: Yeah, they always took their dress caps and threw them in the air in the courtyard, which was the confines of our barracks.

ROBINSON: After graduation, what happened then?

DANIEL: We went to our first duty station, which in my case was Fort Benning, Georgia.

ROBINSON: All your classmates, did you ever run into them later on?

DANIEL: Yes, there is a VMI Association, and I communicate with them quite frequently. We had a tradition, which somehow has broken down during the years. We received a VMI ring, which my fiancée Nancy Power has my VMI ring. We also received a miniature, which you could give to the young lady of your choosing, but now somehow or another they've dropped that tradition. I've tried for years to get a replacement ring for that miniature, but have not been able to do so. I'm working with friends to try to get some sort of ring that's the equivalent of an engagement ring.

ROBINSON: When you got down to Fort Benning after graduation, did you immediately start training, or was there ...

DANIEL: Immediately.

ROBINSON: Immediately. And you did your Infantry Officer Basic Course?

DANIEL: Infantry Officer Basic Course, then the Airborne course, then the Ranger course.

ROBINSON: Was it expected of you to go to Ranger course after that; for infantry officers?

DANIEL: No, I mean you could do what you wanted to. We also had a Demolitions course they wanted us to attend, which we did attend.

ROBINSON: Did most people choose to do Ranger, or was it thought of as too difficult for most people to do?

DANIEL: Well, it was about, I'd say probably fifty to sixty percent chose to do [the] Ranger course, but as far as I was concerned, you weren't an infantry officer if you weren't Ranger qualified.

ROBINSON: What happened to those infantry officers who weren't Ranger qualified? Did they have a harder time in their careers?

DANIEL: I would think they probably did, I don't know.

ROBINSON: What do you remember about your Infantry Officer Course, was a lot of it stuff you already ...

DANIEL: Absorbed, yeah. I'd already absorbed it at VMI.

ROBINSON: So, you and the other military academy lieutenants were head and shoulders above the ones from civilian ROTC [Reserve Officer Training Corps] or ...

DANIEL: Yeah, we were the officers of the brigade.

ROBINSON: Was there a lot of competition between VMI and West Point and then the other commissioning sources such as ROTC?

DANIEL: Particularly between VMI and West Point.

ROBINSON: What did you think of West Pointers at the time?

DANIEL: I thought they were snotty individuals. They weren't near as good as they were claimed to be. Particularly with things having to do with physical training, we were far superior to them.

ROBINSON: How tough was the physical part of infantry course?

DANIEL: Tough enough where people would pass out during the PT [physical training]. Of course, we had to make as close to one hundred percent on the PT test as possible. We also played intramural athletics with them [West Point graduates], and we'd knock them on their ass as much as we could. I mean, they were good people but they just thought that automatically, because they were West Point graduates, they were better than we were, and they found out that wasn't so.

ROBINSON: How long was that course, the infantry course?

DANIEL: I think it was something like twenty-six weeks. About six months long.

ROBINSON: Did you have a lot of off-time as far as weekends and chances to go on pass?

DANIEL: Well, if we had done well during the week we could be off for Friday night, Saturday, and Sunday.

ROBINSON: What would you do when you got off-time?

DANIEL: Well, I would either travel up to one of the towns adjacent to the girls schools or go to downtown Columbus, Georgia, where we would meet young ladies.

ROBINSON: When you got to Airborne School, how prepared did you feel to lead troops to combat after all your training?

DANIEL: I felt well-prepared to do everything except jump out of an airplane, and then I had to learn to do that.

ROBINSON: Airborne school was a hard obstacle for you?

DANIEL: I did very well 'cause I was in pretty good physical condition. They had three major parts to the Airborne course. The first was the thirty-four foot tower, where you jumped out ... in a harness. That was called the swing landing trainer, and you would simulate jumping out of an airplane by jumping out of that tower. And you would have to do that until they declared you proficient at jumping out of an airplane. Then they took us, once we qualified there, to the two hundred and fifty foot tower where they would raise us up to two hundred and fifty feet with a parachute already deployed and when you hit the top of the tower, it would automatically release you and you had to do a parachute landing fall, at the height of two hundred and fifty feet.

ROBINSON: Were you scared of heights, before you did Airborne School?

DANIEL: I guess as much as any normal male would be.

ROBINSON: What was it like falling two hundred and fifty feet?

DANIEL: Scared the shit out of me.

ROBINSON: (Laughs) Did you go a lot faster than you thought you would with the parachute?

DANIEL: Yeah.

ROBINSON: What did it feel like to land?

DANIEL: Well, it was not a bad landing at all. If I had not learned how to do that [land properly] I probably would have hurt myself when I later on jumped, or when I fell here at this

location. You land on the balls of your feet, which is called the first point of contact. Then you hit on the calves of your leg, and then on your buttocks. In my case on the right buttocks, and then on the push-up muscle, and the deltoid muscle, and you grasp your helmet with both arms to shield your face.

ROBINSON: What type of airplanes did you jump out of?

DANIEL: C-130, C-123, C-119; “flying boxcar.”

ROBINSON: What was the best plane to jump out of?

DANIEL: C-130.

ROBINSON: C-130? Do you remember your first jump, what went through your mind before you went out the door?

DANIEL: Two words that I’ve mentioned a couple times, I said “Aw, shucks” when I jumped out, except it wasn’t exactly those words.

ROBINSON: (Laughs) What do you remember feeling when you hit and were safe on the ground?

DANIEL: I said a prayer to the good Lord that I made it all right.

ROBINSON: And after Airborne training, you had Ranger School?

DANIEL: Yes sir, I did.

ROBINSON: Did you have any gap, or you went immediately to the Ranger?

DANIEL: I think we had two weeks between the two.

ROBINSON: Did you do anything to get ready for Ranger School then?

DANIEL: No, we just ... I have never been a person that uses alcohol, so I didn’t drink, but a lot of guys did and they paid for it when they went through the Ranger course. They tossed their cookies many times, as some of them did when we jumped out of an airplane of the Airborne training.

ROBINSON: We’ll talk about Ranger School next.

DANIEL: Okay.

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ROBINSON: We had been talking about Airborne School and graduation from that.

DANIEL: Yeah.

ROBINSON: You said you had two weeks and then went to Ranger School. What were the rumors and kinda the word on the street about Ranger School, about its difficulty, and did that make you nervous at all?

DANIEL: Yes, it did. I knew I would either make it or not make it in Airborne School, I knew, you know, that it was luck as well as skill, and physical conditioning. The Ranger course was divided into one week of Basic Ranger training, and then another week of scouting and patrolling, which was reconnaissance phase. The third week was a jump or combat patrolled [phase]. Combat patrol was the cumulative test and we all were anticipating doing that. The second week, which was recon, were little five man patrols, which really was more difficult than the combat patrol was, because you had to make sure you never got caught.

ROBINSON: Who was trying to catch you?

DANIEL: We had a company that was assigned to the student brigade, which was charged with trying to catch us. And they did their dead-level best to do that. You had to remember all the points you had been taught about road crossings and setting up security and movement and so on, or you would be caught. And if you were caught, they had mock POW [Prisoner of War] camps that they would put people in, where it was just constant push-ups and ...

ROBINSON: Wow, so you really didn't want to be caught.

DANIEL: No, you didn't. (Tape Paused) Am I speaking loud enough?

ROBINSON: Yeah, you're good. I'm just making sure I'm loud enough for them. And that phase was at Fort Benning?

DANIEL: Yeah.

ROBINSON: Then after that you moved to the mountain phase?

DANIEL: To the mountain phase; that's where the combat patrol took place.

ROBINSON: The whole time, about how much sleep a day would you get?

DANIEL: Oh, probably, uh, I'd say sometimes we'd get eight hours of sleep, but most of the time we got much less than that.

ROBINSON: What about food?

DANIEL: Well, you had one meal in the mess hall a day, breakfast meal, which is a great deal like the one I get here with Cheerios and bananas, or some other kind of fruit, and milk, orange juice. But they didn't feed us in the middle of the day, so we just got breakfast and then supper

roll call, or SRC as it was called, where you got a good meal. And then, during the middle of the day, while you were on patrol ... you had to eat C-rations, which is normally consumed cold and were not heated because you didn't want to give away your position.

ROBINSON: Did they have a lot emphasis on staying hydrated and drinking a lot of water?

DANIEL: Yes, we had two canteens of water that we always took with us.

ROBINSON: How hard was Ranger School if you compare it to later in Vietnam when you were in combat?

DANIEL: Ranger School was much harder than what I experienced in Vietnam.

ROBINSON: Did it prepare you for it?

DANIEL: Absolutely. It's the greatest training course that I've ever gone through—the greatest training that I've ever had in my lifetime.

ROBINSON: Did you have people at Ranger School that you had to peer out, that weren't pulling their weight, and how did you deal with them?

DANIEL: Well, course we physically handled people many times on patrols. We literally kicked their ass if they didn't do what they were supposed to do.

ROBINSON: Did the instructors encourage that, or turn a blind eye?

DANIEL: Turned a blind eye. The instructors gave push-ups, sit-ups, and made you run a sprint, which were extremely hard exercises. The push-ups were just like we did in Airborne School. What they did was they'd put their hand down and you had to touch their hand, and the minimum number of push-ups you would do would be ten. That was a pretty rigorous punishment, particularly after you'd been movin' all night. And again, we had a lot of competition between West Point and other schools.

ROBINSON: What was the ratio of officers that went to school to enlisted?

DANIEL: It was probably about twenty-five percent enlisted and seventy-five percent officers, which was really unusual, you know, to have so many more officers than enlisted. But we understood the reason why they were doing it, so nobody had any belly-aching about that. We just wanted to beat each other, is what we wanted to do.

ROBINSON: How much did they teach you about patrolling and scouting in the woods? Did you feel that you could move through the woods pretty well after Ranger School?

DANIEL: Absolutely, absolutely. Every type of movement, from a low belly crawl to a low—we were always taught that the way we had to cross a road was we had to send out security across the road and 100 yards to the right and left of where the patrol would pass. And a hundred

yards forward from the road, and leave a team of a minimum of two individuals on the friendly side of the road, and then run across it at a sprint.

ROBINSON: What else did you learn tactically that you used later on in your career?

DANIEL: Well, how to pass on instructions to those individuals that were under your command, and to do so, so that it would be clear and concise instruction; how to carry your weapon, how to form the patrol, how to use a compass, and all the methods of security while we were moving, visually observing that you had three hundred and sixty degree security as you moved.

ROBINSON: Did you do any airborne jumps as part of Ranger School?

DANIEL: Uh, yeah we had to make, I think it was, one combat jump in each phase.

ROBINSON: What was your favorite phase?

DANIEL: My favorite phase was the reconnaissance phase.

ROBINSON: Where was that at?

DANIEL: That was at Benning.

ROBINSON: At Benning? What about your least favorite?

DANIEL: Well, my least favorite was the first phase, at Benning. So, I liked some of it and I didn't like the other part of the Benning phase.

ROBINSON: When you were a Ranger student what did you think about the Ranger instructors?

DANIEL: Awesome. I wanted to be just like 'em.

ROBINSON: When you graduated, what do you remember feeling?

DANIEL: Immense pride. I felt like I could whip my weight in wildcats.

ROBINSON: And at that time did they have Ranger tabs?

DANIEL: Yes, they did. Course, you had to pay for 'em, but they had Ranger tabs.

ROBINSON: You could wear them on your uniform even if you weren't in a Ranger unit?

DANIEL: That's right.

ROBINSON: And after Ranger School when you went to your unit?

DANIEL: Yeah, which was the 8th Infantry Division, in Germany.

ROBINSON: What was their response when they saw that you had graduated Ranger School?

DANIEL: They walked on the other side of the sidewalk. That boxing glove up there, [Points] you see that on the side?

ROBINSON: Yeah.

DANIEL: That was sent to me by one of my friends, 'cause I was always such a scrapper when we boxed a good bit. That was when I was just a second lieutenant and a Ranger.

ROBINSON: In Germany?

DANIEL: In Germany. The guys that I fought with, some were enlisted men. Fact is, almost everybody I fought with were enlisted men.

ROBINSON: Did you have to take your rank off? Or say rank doesn't matter?

DANIEL: Rank doesn't matter. I just wore whatever was on my fatigues, you know. One of the guys that sent me that ... boxing glove was one of my favorite people who was an NCO [Non-Commissioned Officer], his name was Steve Melneck, M-E-L-N-E-C-K, and he's from New Jersey. He always laughed about saying, "There ain't gonna be any problem fightin' an officer." And he found out different. He's told me different ever since. He'll call me long distance sometimes and talk to me about it. He was a, I don't say this in any prejudice, he was a Polack [Person of Polish descent], and he said he wouldn't have any trouble whipping some rebel second lieutenant. But, I think I showed him different.

ROBINSON: How did you find the older NCOs in your unit? Were they pretty experienced and professional?

DANIEL: Yeah, they were.

ROBINSON: Korean War veterans?

DANIEL: Yeah, very high *esprit de corps*. [The common spirit existing in the members of a group, and inspiring enthusiasm, devotion, and strong regard for the honor of the group.]

ROBINSON: Did you have any difficulty coming in as a new lieutenant, who had never seen combat, in charge of NCOs who had been in Korea?

DANIEL: No, no difficulty whatsoever. Fact is, most of 'em were on the same caliber as my Ranger and Airborne instructors were. I had the greatest respect for them. Fact is, my sergeant major was one of the ranking sergeant majors in the army, and it was a battle group commander's instructions that he would brief every second lieutenant that ever came in.

ROBINSON: What did he brief you?

DANIEL: Courtesy and how I should conduct myself, and how I should train my soldiers to conduct themselves when they were off post. His name was Theodore R. Dobil, D-O-B-E-L or D-O-B-O-L ... and he was the first ranking sergeant major in the United States Army. He was the highest ranking enlisted man in the army except for the Army Sergeant Major, and he was awesome.

ROBINSON: Who was your commander?

DANIEL: The commander of my company was Captain McNicholl, M-C-N-I-C-H-O-L-L, who was from Massachusetts. I commonly referred to him as Captain Mac.

ROBINSON: Had he been in Korea?

DANIEL: Yes, he'd been in Korea.

ROBINSON: Did he mentor you a lot?

DANIEL: He did. He took me under his wing, as did Sergeant Major Dobil. Sergeant Major Dobil called me the commander of Alpha troops. And I had another company commander who was headquarters company commander and I'm groping for his name right now. He was a little short, but tough as hell, that guy. He stayed up with us in anything we ever did. I apologize to him, and to you, for not being able to recall his name right now but it just has slipped away from me over the years.

ROBINSON: That's okay. How far away were you stationed from the East Germans?

DANIEL: Our training area was almost right directly in East Germany, just on the west side of East Germany.

ROBINSON: Was there a lot of fear about the Russians right on the other side?

DANIEL: There wasn't any fear of it. There was constant preparation. We had a monthly alert where you had to move out to your training area, where you'd put security out. You'd hear it in the morning, it'd be a siren that would wake everybody up, and you'd have to move from your quarters to make it to the assembly area in ten minutes.

ROBINSON: Did you have a chance to travel around Europe?

DANIEL: I did. I travelled to France, I travelled to Italy, I travelled all over Germany.

ROBINSON: What was your favorite thing you saw?

DANIEL: German women. (Laughter)

ROBINSON: How friendly were they to Americans?

DANIEL: Very friendly. They had only one thing that Americans didn't understand, is that they didn't shave under their arms.

ROBINSON: (Laughs) So, the German people were very friendly to the Americans?

DANIEL: Very friendly.

ROBINSON: Was Germany still being rebuilt from World War II?

DANIEL: It was; it was, and we did whatever we could do to help do that.

ROBINSON: So, there were still a lot of former Nazi soldiers roaming around. What was their attitude towards you and your attitude towards them?

DANIEL: When they saw that Ranger tab on my shoulder and my Airborne wings, it was always exceptionally good. As far as we were concerned the war was over, you know. We didn't have any animosity toward them at all. So, there was never any problem between the Germans and the Americans. The only problem was, of course, with the East Germans or the Czechs, the Czechoslovakians.

ROBINSON: After you were second lieutenant, you got promoted to captain and took command still in Germany, correct?

DANIEL: Yes, that's right.

ROBINSON: What company did you take charge of?

DANIEL: I took over C Company.

ROBINSON: What was it like being the company commander?

DANIEL: Awesome—I mean, they treated you with the greatest respect, as you did them. That was one of the things that we were, I think, superior to the West Pointers in. They're very conscious of their being West Point officers and they were better than everybody else. And we did not have that attitude at all. We had to do everything enlisted men had to do, and we honored them and they honored us.

ROBINSON: Were you a straight-leg infantry unit or did you have tanks?

DANIEL: We had tanks.

ROBINSON: Okay.

DANIEL: And armored personnel carriers, and trucks.

ROBINSON: How was training with them?

DANIEL: Greatest time in my life, other than the Ranger course.

ROBINSON: After company command in Germany, where did you go next?

DANIEL: I went to Vietnam.

ROBINSON: In 1966?

DANIEL: Yeah, I went to the—oh, before I went there, I went to the Special Forces School at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

ROBINSON: What did you learn at the Special Forces School?

DANIEL: How to conduct yourself as an advisor to Vietnamese units.

ROBINSON: Did you learn any of the Vietnamese language?

DANIEL: I went through the language school before I went, in Pacific Grove, California.

ROBINSON: Was this a job you volunteered for?

DANIEL: It was.

ROBINSON: What made you want to be an advisor?

DANIEL: Well, it was the only combat that I could get, and I felt it my business to move to the sound of the guns.

ROBINSON: When do you remember first hearing about Vietnam?

DANIEL: While I was at Baumholder, Germany.

ROBINSON: That's when the war had started, or ...

DANIEL: Yeah, that's when the war had started.

ROBINSON: What was everyone saying about it?

DANIEL: They were saying that it was tough as the Korean War, but it was perhaps even tougher in the fact that you had to learn the Vietnamese language. [Training for] which was held at Pacific Grove, California.

ROBINSON: How hard was it to learn the Vietnamese language?

DANIEL: Pretty difficult. It was more difficult than German was, it was different. It was certain phraseology, that's the way you learned it, it was by the phrases rather than by individual words as we did it in Germany.

ROBINSON: Had you met anyone who was Vietnamese before?

DANIEL: Yes, we had Vietnamese students that were there with us.

ROBINSON: What was your impression of them?

DANIEL: I had great respect for them because they were concerned about learning English and they were concerned about being friendly with us. So, I had great respect for the Vietnamese.

ROBINSON: Did you know at that time that you would be advising Vietnamese Rangers?

DANIEL: I was told that there would be a high likelihood that I would be because they were elite troops and they had to learn in courses that were similar to ours. The name of the Vietnamese Rangers was Biệt Động Quân, and that means "soldier who knows much."

ROBINSON: After the Special Forces course, who were you assigned to?

DANIEL: I was assigned to the 1st Ranger Group in Pleiku, Vietnam; Pleiku and Kontum. They had battalions in both places.

ROBINSON: How much time did you have from when you knew you were going to Vietnam and when you actually went? And did you get a chance to visit your family?

DANIEL: I did get a chance to visit my family. And then I had, I think it was, three weeks.

ROBINSON: What was their perception of you being sent to Vietnam, or going to Vietnam?

DANIEL: They were, of course, somewhat afraid for my safety. By that time I had been married and I had three children.

ROBINSON: What did your wife think about you going?

DANIEL: She was very concerned about it but she knew she was an army wife and that's what would happen.

ROBINSON: Where did you meet her?

DANIEL: I met her in Tupelo, Mississippi. My wife and I are in the process of a divorce at this time.

ROBINSON: And you met her while you had already been in the army or before?

DANIEL: I met her while I was in VMI.

ROBINSON: Okay. So, before you went to Vietnam, after all your training, how did they prepare you to go? Did they issue you equipment then? And then how did you get to Vietnam?

DANIEL: They did issue me my equipment, combat equipment, and I went by air. I was flown over there.

ROBINSON: On a military flight?

DANIEL: On a military flight, but a military civilian flight.

ROBINSON: Okay. So, it was a civilian plane?

DANIEL: Yeah.

ROBINSON: With military personnel?

DANIEL: Yeah.

ROBINSON: What do you remember the attitude being of everyone on the plane?

DANIEL: Well, like most of the transportation it had somewhat fear of the method that you were going, that is going by air. And we were a little more nervous in the fact that we didn't have parachutes; it was a civilian aircraft. We knew we could get to the ground by parachute, because we'd done it, but we didn't know about the civilian flight.

ROBINSON: Did you fly over there by yourself? Or were you with other members of your unit?

DANIEL: No, I flew by myself.

ROBINSON: What happened once you touched down in Vietnam?

DANIEL: Well, first we had to go to Saigon where actually the equipment, I misspoke, the equipment was issued in Saigon.

ROBINSON: Okay.

DANIEL: When I touched down we were brought in to our location by an Australian aircraft called the Caribou. And what we had to do was throw our duffle bag out and then we had to jump out after it onto the landing strip.

ROBINSON: While the plane was still taxiing?

DANIEL: While the plane was still moving.

ROBINSON: Wow. And that was—from Saigon you flew to Pleiku or Kontum?

DANIEL: Pleiku.

ROBINSON: Pleiku? When you got off the plane in Saigon, what do you remember thinking?

DANIEL: Well, it smelled different, looked different, and people were speaking Vietnamese. And there were a lot of attractive Vietnamese girls there. They wore a special native costume known as an aodai, spelled A-O-D-A-I, which had extremely sheer, tight, long pants and it looked like a dress, with the top split in the front and the back.

ROBINSON: So like a slip dress?

DANIEL: Yeah, slip dress is a very good description.

ROBINSON: (Laughs) Did the army have girls set up to greet you ...

DANIEL: Yes, they did.

ROBINSON: ... as you got off the plane?

DANIEL: They did.

ROBINSON: Did you get a chance to see Saigon at all? Or were you immediately on the plane to Pleiku?

DANIEL: No, I got a chance to see Saigon a little bit. I was there during an attack by the Vietcong, as a matter of fact.

ROBINSON: What happened during that attack?

DANIEL: They used demolitions to try to blow up a civilian bar, which GIs frequented.

ROBINSON: Was that the first time you'd seen the mayhem that goes with war?

DANIEL: It was.

ROBINSON: What do you remember thinking?

DANIEL: Oh, shit. (Laughter)

ROBINSON: That's a good one. Was the flight to Pleiku—when did it really sink in that "I'm here, the enemies out" ...

DANIEL: When I flew my duffle bag out and jumped out after it.

ROBINSON: That's when it sunk in that, "There is an enemy out here trying to..."

DANIEL: Yeah.

ROBINSON: "...get me." Was Pleiku—how fortified was it? Was it under constant attack?

DANIEL: Extremely well fortified.

ROBINSON: Uh huh.

DANIEL: We were mortared every night.

ROBINSON: Really?

DANIEL: Yeah.

ROBINSON: Did that become a big deal? Or what happened when you first got mortared?

DANIEL: Well, I got to the nearest foxhole I could get to, which was right outside my tent into a bunker.

ROBINSON: Did that become just a nuisance every night? And you paid it no attention?

DANIEL: No, we always paid attention to it. But it was not as bad as one would think it would be, because they were notably inaccurate with their mortars, I mean not with their mortars, but with their rockets. They fired at us with rockets and mortars too; 120 millimeter rockets. If you got hit there it was either sort of a hit or miss. When they mortared you, that was extremely serious because they had the range and the deflection. And the way they got that was to send Vietnamese who worked on the post, barbers and such, to recon where the tents were. They tried to adjust mortar fire to hit. The rockets, they had difficulty aiming.

(Tape Paused)

Got half a brain here and some things I remember better than others.

ROBINSON: Oh you're doing a great job. So, Pleiku, was it a bustling base? How many soldiers were there?

DANIEL: Oh, I don't recall exactly how many, but we had a regiment there at the time, or the equivalent. That was what the Ranger group was, the equivalent of a regiment. That is, three Ranger battalions.

ROBINSON: So, the Rangers, you were based at Pleiku and you'd fly out and do missions, or walk out and do missions?

DANIEL: That's right.

ROBINSON: Okay. So that was your base camp?

DANIEL: Yeah.

ROBINSON: How was the area around there as far as enemy activity? Was it a pretty hot area?

DANIEL: Well, anytime you moved out on a convoy or something you were likely to get ambushed. Of course we'd been taught the techniques of counter-ambush, jumping out of the trucks.

ROBINSON: Now, Pleiku was connected by, was it, only one highway, right?

DANIEL: Yeah.

ROBINSON: Okay. What type of missions would you often do?

DANIEL: Recon and combat. Highway 1 was the name of the highway.

ROBINSON: Highway 1? Okay. How was the regiment set up, as far as, how many American advisors were there? And what were you in charge of?

DANIEL: Okay, we normally had four advisors to every battalion. The advisors were, you just had an advisory team and that went with a battalion. And normally you had an officer, a senior enlisted man, and either one or two radio operators with each company. Did I say, what did I say before?

ROBINSON: Four per battalion, so it was four per company?

DANIEL: Yeah, four per company, yeah.

ROBINSON: So you were assigned to a company?

DANIEL: Yeah.

ROBINSON: How were the Vietnamese officers?

DANIEL: They were pretty well-trained.

ROBINSON: Were a lot of them American trained?

DANIEL: Most of them were American trained, but the Vietnamese did not have as much respect for their officers as they did for us.

ROBINSON: Did they have NCOs?

DANIEL: Yeah.

ROBINSON: Were they the ones who had more of the respect than the officers?

DANIEL: Yeah.

ROBINSON: Did the Vietnamese Rangers have an equivalent of the American Ranger School that they went through?

DANIEL: Yes.

ROBINSON: What was that called?

DANIEL: Oh, gosh. I can't remember the name of it right now, but it was Biệt Động Quân School.

ROBINSON: Was it based on American Ranger School?

DANIEL: Yeah.

ROBINSON: Would you say it was as hard as American Ranger School?

DANIEL: No.

ROBINSON: No. The Vietnamese Rangers, were they volunteers?

DANIEL: All volunteers.

ROBINSON: All volunteers. How did they compare to your normal ARVN forces [South Vietnamese Army]?

DANIEL: Far superior.

ROBINSON: Far superior?

DANIEL: Yeah.

ROBINSON: A lot of people ... sometimes don't have the best things to say about your normal ARVN soldiers and ARVN units. What would you say about that?

DANIEL: Well, before we got to 'em I think that might've been the case, that they weren't as good as our soldiers were. But after they'd been through their Ranger course, they were as good if not better.

ROBINSON: Where were most of them from in Vietnam?

DANIEL: Well, they were mostly, I mean, they were from all over, but most of them I think were from Saigon.

ROBINSON: Did their families live near the camp?

DANIEL: Their families travelled with them wherever they went.

ROBINSON: So not only did you have to deal with the men, but did you also have to deal with the families?

DANIEL: I wouldn't call it deal, I think we were privileged to work with them, 'cause they didn't give us any trouble at all. None.

ROBINSON: So you got to meet the families as well?

DANIEL: Yeah.

ROBINSON: What type of equipment did the Vietnamese Rangers have?

DANIEL: They had the same type equipment we did.

ROBINSON: So they used M16s and ...

DANIEL: Yeah, they used M16s and they had two canteens on their belt, course they wouldn't drink all that water 'cause they were little bitty guys, but they had combat fatigues, except it was of a lighter weight. Their fatigues were extremely light.

ROBINSON: Were they the tiger striped type?

DANIEL: Yeah, yes.

ROBINSON: Did they wear helmets or did they wear berets in battle?

DANIEL: Most of the time they wore helmets.

ROBINSON: What sort of insignia did they have that stood the Vietnamese Rangers apart from other Vietnamese units?

DANIEL: Well it was the black tiger insignia. It showed a tiger. It had BDQ on it, Biệt Động Quân. There weren't any animals over there, because the Vietnamese ate 'em.

ROBINSON: All sorts of animals?

DANIEL: Yeah.

ROBINSON: Even pets?

DANIEL: Yeah.

ROBINSON: Ugh.

DANIEL: Which really sort of disgusted us, we ...

ROBINSON: Did they ever offer you that?

DANIEL: Several times.

ROBINSON: Did you eat it?

DANIEL: I didn't eat any of that.

ROBINSON: How were the fitness levels of the Vietnamese Rangers?

DANIEL: Oh ... their fitness level was as good, if not better, than ours.

ROBINSON: Could they move better through the jungle and ...

DANIEL: Yes. 'Course that rice was part of every meal, you know, you'd eat enough rice so your eyes started to slant.

ROBINSON: So, you did everything with them, right there with them ...

DANIEL: I did; everything.

ROBINSON: Did you feel like they respected you a lot more because of that?

DANIEL: Yeah.

ROBINSON: Did some of the other Ranger advisors, kind of, scoff at the idea of having to eat the Vietnamese food and try to do their own thing?

DANIEL: There were some that did. I didn't have any respect for them when they did, and told them so.

ROBINSON: How prepared were you language-wise when you got there?

DANIEL: Well, I went through the language school, which was I think twenty-six weeks, so I spoke much better Vietnamese than I did German. I spoke German as well, but Vietnamese, I'd had about twice as much training, and I was much more familiar with the customs of the country than I was in Germany.

ROBINSON: Did a lot of the Vietnamese soldiers you worked with speak English?

DANIEL: Yeah, almost all of them did.

ROBINSON: So you could communicate pretty well?

DANIEL: Yeah, we didn't have any problem with communication.

ROBINSON: What were some of the cultures and customs that surprised you?

DANIEL: Well, of course, the female attire, that was one of the things. And they had these conical hats that they wore, made of straw. I've already described the dresses they wore which were a lot like, in a way, today what girls wear, slacks with a dress over it. 'Course the food was different. Their weapon of choice was a carbine, M1 carbine; M1 and then M2 carbines.

ROBINSON: Okay.

DANIEL: Because they were much lighter until we got the M16s.

ROBINSON: Versus the M14s?

DANIEL: Yeah. They didn't like to carry the M14 because it was much heavier.

ROBINSON: Were they good shots?

DANIEL: No.

ROBINSON: No?

DANIEL: Couldn't hit a bear in the ass with a bull.

ROBINSON: Did they just put it on auto and spray? Or did they not know how to take time and line up their shot and aim?

DANIEL: Well, they didn't take time. Now, why they didn't was always a mystery to us but that was one of the first things we had to do, is to make sure that they were firing. The carbine is a pretty good weapon, it's not something you throw down and throw away.

ROBINSON: This concludes part one of the interview with Lt. Col. John S. Daniel, retired, and interviewed by Will Robinson on the 30th of June, 2009.