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Dartmouth College Oral History Program
The Dartmouth Vietnam Project
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Transcribed by Sarah S. Sim '21

SLETTEN: Good.

SIM: Awesome. I confirm that this call is being recorded. This is Sarah Sim. Today is Sunday, October 25, 2020 and I am conducting this oral history interview for the Dartmouth Vietnam project. I am conducting this interview by Zoom video call with Mr. Bob Sletten. I am in Orange County, California, and Mr. Sletten is speaking to me from West Lebanon, New Hampshire. Mr. Sletten, thank you so much for speaking to me today.

SLETTEN: Glad to be here.

SIM: Okay, great. Why don't we just get started. When and where were you born?

SLETTEN: I was born in Florence, South Carolina on February 9, 1944.

SIM: You were born in South Carolina. Did you grow up in South Carolina?

SLETTEN: No, it was kind of an accident. My dad was in the service in World War Two, and he happened to be stationed there at that time when I was born. And when I was less than a year old, we went back— both my parents were from Minnesota— so we went back to Minnesota and he went back overseas and, I and my mother and then my sister was born while he was overseas and we stayed in Minnesota until 1950.

SIM: Right. Well, let me go back a second. You said you have a sister. Is that your only sibling or...?

SLETTEN: No. I'll go ahead and expound a little bit. I'm the oldest. I'm the firstborn of six kids, I have five sisters and all [inaudible] I was born in South Carolina. My next three sisters were born in Minnesota in 1950. My dad was recalled for service in the Korean War. So from then on, we were military brats. So my last two sisters- one was born in California, Muroc [CA], up by Edwards Air Force Base. And my other sister was born in Washington, DC. Anacostia Naval base. So yeah, I'm from a family of six kids.

SIM: Wow. It must have been hard to have been the only son, surrounded by so many sisters. What was that like?

- SLETTEN: It was and it wasn't. I was the oldest. I always got my own bedroom. They all had to share [laughter]. So I never had to share a bedroom or anything. It's a... at the time, I guess I didn't appreciate it but I'm reasonably close with most of my sisters, particularly the next two that are next to oldest to me, but in fact, just before— well, when I went out for my niece's wedding, a year ago, it was basically a family reunion. We were all there except for one sister. So it was, it was really quite nice.
- SIM: You're pretty close to some of your sisters now, but were you as close to them when you were growing up?
- SLETTEN: Um, age-wise, yes. Not always activity-wise or interest-wise. We, as a family, we did certain things together. We had certain rituals and all that, but I guess, in retrospect, we were reasonably close. We didn't... we all got along. You know, like any family, siblings sometimes annoy each other, but we did fine with each other, I think.
- SIM: That's so nice to hear. Well, you mentioned you and your family had rituals or traditions. Can you tell me a little bit about them?
- SLETTEN: Well, we were, we were a military family so, at certain bases, we would go on the weekend to the Officers Club Swimming pool. When we lived in Massachusetts, we went to the beach every Sunday. We had Sunday dinner. We watched certain shows back then that were popular, some with popcorn. Kind of 1950s America, I guess you could say, which may not mean too much to you. You're very much the younger generation but there weren't all the distractions I guess you could say that people have now with cell phones and computers and social media and all that sort of stuff. It's pretty much family, neighborhood, school, that sort of thing.
- SIM: You must have grown up during the Cold War. Did you feel like the Cold War was really present in your lives, growing up?
- SLETTEN: We were aware that it was there and we had drills and we were aware of shelters, you know, fallout shelters and things like that. But I don't think it was necessarily oppressive or anything like that. We were just, we were kids, you know, we had our own things to do, playing and all that sort of stuff. But we were very much aware that it was there. And of course, my dad being in the military and you know, we knew that Russia was the adversary and that we were in a con— not a conflict, not a hot conflict, anyway, but certainly a competition with Russia and Communism, basically Communism. And so, it was not oppressive, you know, in terms of overshadowing at least as young children, as younger children, I

guess. As we got a little older, we became somewhat more aware, but I don't recall. Well, there was Sputnik, you know, the first in space. There were the H bomb tests or atom bomb tests, there were things like that, but they didn't really have much of an effect on my life at that time.

SIM: Did you ever feel like being the product of the military, in a sense, as a military brat, you and your siblings- do you feel like that impacted your childhood immensely or even influence your decision to go into the Armed Forces, when you were older?

SLETTEN: I guess I'd have to say yes. If I had been, you know, if he had never- if there had never been a World War Two- and we were born in Minnesota, you know, where are our roots were and stayed in Minnesota, I'd have a much different outlook on things. But I guess I would say that changing locations every couple of years and being with other military kids and then as I got older, looking at my options for adulthood- the military was always present in my life.

SIM: Really?

SLETTEN: Yes.

SIM: Okay, yeah, well, let's change gears a little bit. Tell me a little bit about your schooling. Did you have to move schools pretty frequently, where did you go to school? What was your favorite school? [laughter]

SLETTEN: I went to 12 different schools.

SIM: Wow.

SLETTEN: Up to 12th grade, three high schools. I started school in Minnesota, and then I guess I did first grade in Kansas, Fort Leavenworth, and second grade in Ohio- Wright Patterson Air Force Base, and, I don't know, third, fourth, maybe in Massachusetts. Fifth, sixth, seventh, and part of ninth in California and then high school in Maryland and I graduated high school in Maryland.

SIM: Wow, did you ever feel like you had trouble making friends or feeling adjusted because you were switching schools so often?

SLETTEN: Not too much. You know, I made new friends, each place I went and as did my sisters, we always felt a little bit "the outsider" I think, because we were in school with people that had known each other- for instance, in ninth or 10th grade, we were in school with people who had known each other since first or second grade, but

you know, we just... it was what our reality was, so we just, I don't think we were felt put upon or anything. In some ways, we felt kind of lucky because we've been around and then we'd camped in Yellowstone [National Park, CA] and gone to Yosemite [National Park, CA] and seen the Carlsbad Caverns [National Park, NM] and traveled through the south and been to Disneyland [CA] when it first opened and, you know, been to the beach and Delaware and all that kind of stuff. So we got to see a lot of the country, that's for sure.

SIM: Yeah. In school, what were you most interested in, subjects wise?

SLETTEN: When I did my last school, I did the better part of three grades there, 10th, 11th and 12th, and I was on what they called the academic track. So there was a general, vocational, and an academic. So the academic loaded you up with science and math and all four years of English. And I think it was, was it three years or four years of a foreign language, French, and I did— I struggled with some of my science courses but overall I liked the science and the math. And I was very glad that I was exposed to French. And English was always kind of a chore, but I always did well in it so I guess I was kind of oriented toward the, what nowadays they call STEM, you know, [inaudible].

SIM: Did you choose the academic track or was it kind of put on to you?

SLETTEN: I guess it was... it didn't appear that there was an option at the time that it was there, you know, it was just an automatic, I was going to go there, because for the most part I had done well in school. When we moved from Massachusetts to California, I and my next two sisters were jumped a grade. So we were always the youngest kids in the class and we jumped a grade because we'd already covered the stuff we were going to be covering in Massachusetts. So because we had always done— it was expected that we would do well and good to get good grades— it was just kind of an automatic that we would go to the academic track which is what we did.

SIM: You mentioned earlier that you know, the military and the military career path was always kind of present all throughout your education. Did you ever feel like maybe that was your destined career choice? Did you have any thoughts about higher education in university and college?

SLETTEN: Yes. When I said— it wasn't really there as a career path for me. I did not think that I would ever spend a lifetime in the military. And in fact, my dad, it was sort of accidental too. He liked to fly. You know, he was a pilot and he was a pilot in World War Two and

when the war ended, he stayed in the [Air Force] Reserves for two reasons. One, he needed the money because he went back to college on the GI Bill and had three kids, and the other, because he just loved to fly. So when the Korean War came, he was recalled and as it turned out, he didn't end up going to Korea. After a couple of years, they sent him to graduate school at MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology]. So, he needed to spend some time— extra time in the military to pay that off, but there came a time when he could have either gone back out and gone back into civilian life or stayed in and he made the decision to stay in so it was sort of accidental when he spent a career in the military.

So I never really thought of it as a career opportunity or possibility. I just assumed— I took it as a given that the draft existed and at some point I would serve my time and get out. Of course, this was all before there was another war that happened, but I just assumed that at some point I would spend at least a minimal amount of time in the military.

And as far as college goes, when I was 17 and getting ready to graduate high school, I did not want— I was, I wanted to be away from home. I did not want to, you know, I was— I wanted to go the easiest way, the easiest possible way to get away from home.

SIM: Could I ask why—

SLETTEN: Not that I was particularly rebellious or anything, but I had had enough living with all my sisters and all that. So I was going to take a job or I was actually looking at enlisting in the military and just getting that up over with and kind of seeing the world and everything. And they made it very clear to me two things. Number one, they would not— I was underage— and they would not give me permission to go in the military, and that they expected that I would go to college, so I did apply to colleges and I got accepted and I went.

SIM: Where did you go?

SLETTEN: I went to New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, New Mexico.

SIM: How long were you there?

SLETTEN: Part of the reason that I chose, there were a couple of reasons I chose that, in being honest and in retrospect. Number one, they had co-op programs there so I could do work study and get a long way toward paying my own expenses. Number two, it was kind of a long way away from my family. So I should be away. And number three, it was quite cheap at that time, even for an out of state student. And after the fact, all of that worked out really, really

well because I got on to a co-op program that— I'm answering your question in a roundabout way. I was, I was actually enrolled there for six years. I started school, I went out there when I was 17 in 1961 and my co-op program gave me work phases in the Samoan Islands, the Philippine Islands and Antarctica. So it extended by overall schooling and I graduated in 1967.

SIM: You said these co-op programs let you travel to all these different places. How did that really work? Were you doing a study abroad type of program over there?

SLETTEN: Nope, we were—at New Mexico State, there's an outfit [that] still exists, called the Physical Science Lab, and they would bid on contracts that the government would put out. And it turned out that they landed a subcontract with the Applied Physics Lab at Johns Hopkins University [Baltimore, MD], which had been contracted by the Navy to do a satellite navigation system— to do the research and set that up. As it turns out, that it was kind of the, it was the forerunner of the modern GPS that we have, and that we all know and love today. So PSL, Physical Science Lab at my place was subcontracted to provide the manpower at all these remote locations around the world. So we did two semesters worth of training and what our duties would be in manning these satellite tracking stations and then we would be sent out there and we would spend two semesters either spring/summer or, summer/fall or fall/spring semester. And then we would come back and go back to school. So it was a year round deal, you know, basically, we were always either at work or in school. So I did three summer stations.

SIM: Did you ever, well, let me ask, what did you major in while you were there? I'm guessing a STEM major?

SLETTEN: Yeah, I majored in Civil Engineering and this co-op program took people that were majoring in three kinds of engineering: Civil, Mechanical and Electrical, or Math or Physics. Those were the only majors that could apply for the program. So I was a Civil Engineering major and graduated with a degree in Civil Engineering.

SIM: Did you like your major?

SLETTEN: I did. I liked it quite a lot. My dad had been a Mechanical Engineer. When he went to University of Minnesota after the war, he got a degree in Mechanical Engineering. And we had talked over the years about engineering and all that. And my main reason for picking Civil rather than Mechanical or Electrical was that I thought I might have a greater opportunity to be outdoors, as opposed to

be in a lab or a shop or something like that. And it turned out to be true. Kinda.

SIM: I'm glad it kind of worked out for you then.

SLETTEN: It did, you know, and I'm very pleased to have... the school was good for engineering, very good for engineering, and I made enough money that after the first semester— my parents paid my first semester. And after that, I paid my own way through college because it was quite economical— the college was, and I made enough money to pay all my own expenses and got to see quite a lot of the world.

SIM: Wow.

SLETTEN: So it worked out very well.

SIM: Okay, so you graduated in 1967, and if I'm correct, a year later, you would enter Vietnam, correct?

SLETTEN: Yes, let me go back on that. My senior year, starting in September of [19]66, as I imagine seniors still do, started thinking about their future, what was going to happen after college. I'm sure you are. [laughter] And I hope that the search is going well in these COVID [COVID-19] days.

SIM: Thanks. [laughter]

SLETTEN: I started— actually back then, a lot of recruiters came on campus and they offered— you would sign up for, you know, I signed up for Shell Oil Company and Slumber J [Wireline Services Co.] and State of California and several others that I remember. And several of them flew me out, you know, Shell took me out to San Francisco, and they were actively recruiting bachelor engineers from places that were in, you know, were producing that. So that was on the horizon. I was thinking— all of them, all of them that I interviewed with said— you know, I don't know if you know this or not, you probably do because you've been involved with this [The Dartmouth Vietnam] project, but the draft existed. The draft could take young men involuntarily and put them in the service and all of these recruiters were telling me, "Oh yeah, we'll get you a deferment or whatever they call it and it'll get me out of the draft." And I said, "You know, I, this, this could be a possibility." But at some point along the way, by that time, I should backtrack a little bit. By that time, my parents had been transferred to Okinawa, Japan.

SIM: Oh.

SLETTEN: And my dad was flying transport planes out of Okinawa out to Vietnam. So he was spending two, three weeks, sometimes as much as two or three months down in Vietnam flying all over the country. And I'll backtrack even a little more. My grandfather had been in World War One. He was an infantryman in World War One. So I had those kinds of things in, in my mind. And at some point, I look— and also when I first got to college, because it was a land grant college, we had to take ROTC— Reserve Officer Training Corps. So you were compelled to do it for two years and then you potentially could do it for an extra two years and get a commission. And I was in Army ROTC for two years and having grown up in the Air Force and been in Army ROTC, I knew I didn't want to be in the Army or the Air Force, either one.

SIM: Why not?

SLETTEN: Because, for the Air Force, because when I was about 12 or 13 years old, I ended up with eyeglasses. And there's only two kinds of people in the Air Force: pilots and everybody else. Once I got the eyeglasses, I knew I could never be a pilot in the Air Force. So I did not want to be in the Air Force.

The Army? I just did not like the army. [laughter] I didn't like it. For, I don't know what reasons, but I didn't. But anyway, so I looked at the Navy, and lo and behold, they had what they called the Seabees. And the Seabees are construction people. And being a civil engineer, I thought, well, if I do have to go in the service, even if all these outfits are telling me that they could give me a deferment and I might not have to serve at all, I still felt some obligation that, you know, I probably should do some service. Even knowing that it would probably be in Vietnam. So I went to talk to a recruiter, Navy Recruiter, and in December of [19]66 toward the end of my first, my first semester of my senior year, I was actually sworn into the Navy.

SIM: Wow.

SLETTEN: So, my report day was put off until after I graduated, so I graduated in May of '67 and in July of '67, I reported to OCS [Officer Candidate School] in Newport, Rhode Island.

SIM: How did you feel about the war during this time before or after you were sworn in?

SLETTEN: I can remember having discussions with people thinking that, you know, it hadn't touched really too many of us. Obviously, it had touched me because my dad was in it. And thinking, you know, "Why is, why are we in this war?" But you have to remember the

Cold War and the Communists and the domino theory and all that other stuff. And in my case, you know, when your country is at war and they need you, or they call on you or there's a war for the country to be involved in, you—it was kind of your duty to do that. So on the one hand, I wasn't political about it at all. I was aware of some demonstrations against the war. It hadn't really taken off at that point— early on in say [19]65, [19]66 I think most people, middle of the roaders, you know, what you call "Middle America," war comes, you know, you've got to rally to the country and you fight in the war or you do your part in the war.

By the time that I went on active duty in [19]67 it was—it was getting a little less acceptable, I guess, and you know, by the time I actually went overseas in [19]68 which.. it turned out that Martin Luther King was assassinated in April of [19]68 and about three days I was, I left the country to go overseas. And by then with the assassinations, you know, with first Kennedy. I mean, well, Kennedy in [19]63 which was a pretty big deal. We weren't in the war yet, but Kennedy, followed by Martin Luther King and then RFK [Robert F. Kennedy] in June of that year, just before the Democratic Convention. Things were really in turmoil and being in Vietnam in '68 in some ways probably insulated me from a lot of that. I was not— I was aware of stuff going on. But, you know, we were busy and occupied with other things.

So to try to put it in context of the times and how my feelings were at the time; I can look back from here and say, well, you know, "Why did I do that or how did that come to be?" but at the time it was just sort of a natural progression, you know, I could have been out of it all together if I'd taken the job at Shell Oil, you know. And probably [would have] made a lot of money, polluted the earth in retrospect, [laughter] to work for Slumber J down and in Texas, you know, and started building stuff all over, or even ended up at a consulting company somewhere else, but instead I was, I was in the Seabees and in Vietnam.

SIM: Well, let me backtrack a bit. How did your parents feel when you were sworn in, and you were going to go to Vietnam?

SLETTEN: We didn't have huge discussions about it. I think my dad was actually kind of pleased or proud of me for stepping up and doing it. And I think my mother was not very happy about it at all, you know, considering that she had a husband who she lost a couple of years to, with during World War Two, when he was overseas. And I think they were always supportive. We did a lot of letters, but we did not explore in depth, whether it was right or wrong, or... because he was in it and I was in it.

In fact, on my second trip when I went back over the second time, he and my mother and my younger two sisters were coming back from Japan, you know. He was retiring from the Service and we met at Travis Air Force Base [CA], as I was going back out for my second tour, and he was coming back from there to get out of the Air Force. So we didn't have a lot of discussion. It just, once I was embarked on that track, it was just, I was there, you know, I was going to go where they sent me, do what they wanted me to do, and be done with it and get out, be done. And that's kind of just the way it worked.

SIM: If it's okay, could I actually ask for your parents' names? I forgot to ask earlier.

SLETTEN: Oh, sure. My dad was Robert [Sletten], like me, different middle name, and my mother Lucille [Sletten]. And they both passed on. My dad was born in Minnesota in 1920, And my mother was born in Minnesota in 1922. And they were married in Minnesota, in 1943 and nine months later there I was. [laughter]

SIM: And your story begins from there. [laughter] Okay, awesome.

SLETTEN: Kind of. Theirs doesn't. [laughter]

SIM: Okay, so then you are sworn in, you graduate and your training begins at the Naval Academy. Correct?

SLETTEN: At what they call Naval Officer Candidate School, which was in Newport, Rhode Island. And it was college graduates who have volunteered to go into the Navy. And it was an 18 week course in Newport. And it included everybody except doctors and lawyers, I guess. But everybody that was going to be on ships or in the Supply Corps or in the Seabees or doing other things in the Navy, we were all thrown in there together.

SIM: From when to when was your training here in Newport?

SLETTEN: That was from mid-July. I believe I checked in on July 15 or so of 1967 until November. Graduated and was commissioned as an officer on the 17th of November [19]67.

SIM: What did your training look like?

SLETTEN: Well, it was, it was how to be an officer in the Navy, basically is what it was. So it had to do with leadership, technical things that I was not going to use, but I still found interesting like navigation and seamanship and physical training. And I remember we did some time on the rifle range. And we did time in for damage control and a little mockup ship where they were flooding it and we

were having to, you know, keep it from sinking and we went out on these little boats— all big bunches of boats, you know, where we would do fleet maneuvers. It was, it was actually kind of fun. And, you know, I and one other guy in my section, we're both designated as civil engineer corps officers. So we knew we weren't going to go on ships. So, we felt that it was nice to know, but you know, we don't have to take this too seriously.

And as your next question probably is, "Then what?" Well, the "then what" for Civil Engineer Corps Officers, is that we were sent on to the Civil Engineer Corps Officers School in Port Hueneme, California. So we had an additional period of time now that we were Naval Officers and learning how to function as Civil Engineer Corps Officers in the Navy. So that took from December until March. December of [19]67 until March of [19]68.

SIM: Well, let me backtrack a little bit. You mentioned that you and the other civil engineering officer. You guys both knew that you weren't, you know—

SLETTEN: You weren't going to be on ships.

SIM: Were you close with him?

SLETTEN: As it turns out, we were, because in fact, he was in my wedding, several years later. But, we were in CECOS, what they call CECOS, Civil Engineer Corps Officer School together and then he went off and went on to one duty station and I went to a different one, but two years later we came back together at the same duty station so yeah, we stayed somewhat close.

SIM: That's really nice to hear. And then you are sent to Port Hueneme. Could I ask you to spell that?

SLETTEN: Yes. [laughter] You can look it up. But it's a H-U-N-E-M-E. Oh wait, I'm sorry. H-U-E-N-E-M-E. Hueneme.

SIM: Oh, okay.

SLETTEN: And it's near, there's also a Naval Air Station at Point Mugu [Ventura County, CA]. Have you heard of Point Mugu?

SIM: I haven't.

SLETTEN: Okay, if you look at Oxnard [CA], and it's just down the coast from Oxnard, south, going back toward LA [Los Angeles, CA]. So if you zoom in on Google Maps or whatever, you'll see now, they call it I think "Naval Activities" or something, Ventura County. So it's sort of consolidated there. But it's the main west coast Seabee base

and it's where a lot of the training for both officer and enlisted took place at least back then.

SIM: I'm kind of curious to know, did you ever have to go through counterinsurgency training or training that prepped you for pacification or any other civic action kind of duties?

SLETTEN: Yeah. Yes and no, I guess is probably the better answer. When we finished CECOS, I was assigned to what they call a Naval Mobile Construction Battalion. An MCB. And I became a, you know— a mobile construction battalion is about 800 people, 25 officers. So I was a Company Officer in a construction company and there was a Company Commander and I was the Assistant Company Commander and our company did mostly vertical construction.

We had all the builders and steel workers. So our job really, when we deployed, was to build any kind of structures, you know, either like steel water tanks or barracks or office buildings or anything like that. So in that sense for that tour, when I was with the main body, the actual main body battalion, we didn't do any kind of counterinsurgency stuff. We did— we're organized like a Marine Infantry Battalion. So in addition to the building aspects, all of our people were riflemen, or machine gunners. So we also did quite a lot of military training, but it was oriented more for defense, defensive, whatever we were building for our base and whatever we were building.

To answer, to be more specific on your question: my second tour, I was designated as an Officer-in-Charge of a Seabee team. And the mission of that team was civic action. So we did a lot of cross training, but we also spent three weeks back out in California in Port Hueneme in Vietnamese Language Training. So we did have some, I don't know that you'd call it "counterinsurgency" in the sense that they talk about that now, but we were going to be as a Seabee team, we were going to be direct people to people, you know, we weren't going to be with the Marines or you know, building facilities for them to launch offensive combat stuff or anything like that. We were going to be working directly people-to-people. And there was some cultural sensitivity and language training. Mostly what it involved was cross training of all of our people so that any one person on the team had familiarity with all the other jobs on the team. So the short answer is sort of. But not in the sense that I think you might have asked the question.

SIM: Okay. How long were the Vietnamese language training schools?

SLETTEN: We were only there for three weeks, and it was real basic. It was just enough to try to say "Hi," and "How are you," and "Thank you"

and "Where are the mines?" and "Have you seen any Viet Cong?" and stuff like that, you know. We learned words for bridges and rivers and rice paddies and you know, basically how to be polite with the people that we would be encountering. As it turns out, while I was there, I had an interpreter.

SIM: Oh, you did?

SLETTEN: I did.

SIM: And this interpreter was the interpreter for the entire Seabee team that you managed?

SLETTEN: Yeah, he was. He was kind of an interesting character. His father was a French soldier. First— in the First Indochina War. So, he was half-Vietnamese, half-French and spoke, you know, pretty good street-type English and he was assigned to me and my Second-in-Command, who was the Chief Petty Officer. But I would send them out if I was dispatching two guys out to a village somewhere to work with the villagers, then Alfred would go with them to help with the translation. And a fair number of people that we encountered spoke at least some English— not all but you know, some but we needed the interpreter, quite often.

SIM: Were you close with the interpreter?

SLETTEN: Somewhat. I found out later, many years later that he had put it posted— and I'm not on any social media at all, never have been, never signed up for anything. But one of my fellow team members said that he had been making inquiries on social media. So it was nice to know that he had survived the aftermath of the war. I don't know what became of him or, where, what he had to put up with because anybody that had been associated with the South Vietnamese in any official capacity I don't think fared very well, you know, soldiers, interpreters, government officials, people like that. But I heard that he made some inquiries. I never followed up on it and I don't know what they were about or anything like that.

SIM: Do you remember his name?

SLETTEN: His name was Alfred Lamy. L-A-M-Y.

SIM: Okay, great. How long were you with Alfred Lamy?

SLETTEN: I was there...our Seabee team tour was from, in my case, from the end of May, till the beginning of January, [19]69 to [19]70 so I guess about seven and a half months maybe?

SIM: Yeah, okay. So, you know, I don't know if this is the best time to pull up some photos, but I actually did a little bit of digging and [was] lucky enough to find your cruise books.

SLETTEN: Oh, okay.

SIM: And I found maybe one or two pictures that I would love to share with you and see if you know, you remember anyone or remember anything. I'm sorry, these are my questions. Here we go. Okay. Do you remember— I hope this is you?

SLETTEN: [laughter] That's me. And I should say— this is my "COVID" look. Until March or so, I still looked more like that. I have this short hair and I shaved.

SIM: [laughter] Yeah.

SLETTEN: Yep, that's me.

SIM: Yeah, so I found this photo of you in your 1968 Cruise Book for MCB-71. Do you remember taking this picture? When was this?

SLETTEN: I don't remember when it was, if it was before, after, or when it was, I don't know. I just remember they were telling people to go get their picture taken at some point, but I don't remember when it was.

SIM: You look very sharp.

SLETTEN: [laughter]

SIM: I can go to the next one, actually. This one was actually in next year's Cruise Book in 1969.

SLETTEN: Yeah.

SIM: I think this is you. Am I correct?

SLETTEN: That's me.

SIM: Could you tell me a little bit about your fellow Seabees?

SLETTEN: Yeah. Do you have the whole picture?

SIM: No, I don't. Surprisingly, this was the full picture that I saw in the Cruise Book?

SLETTEN: Ah, ok, because that is Seabee team 7102.

SIM: Yes.

SLETTEN: And I'm standing next to a guy named Tom Seman, who is a construction electrician. And who two months ago, died of COVID.

SIM: Oh wow, I'm so sorry. That's—

SLETTEN: Yeah, he was with us. We had a reunion in San Antonio [TX] in September last year (2019) and he was there, as well as the guy next to him. As well as the two in front of me and him. And nobody could imagine what was going to happen. He was among the younger and more lively, I guess, or you know, he had no ailments or anything like that and we spent quite a lot of time with his wife over the last three, four or five months as he became ill and couldn't come out of it.

SIM: Yeah.

SLETTEN: It just was quite a shock because we all got through it okay. We got through those 50 years ago okay, and then to have that happen is... But there's seven more people off to the left and on the far right is my assistant Officer-in-Charge, who's the Chief Petty Officer, you know, all the way over on the— that's out of the picture. I'm really sorry that the whole crew isn't there.

There's 13 people and there's an Officer-in-Charge, which was me. And a Chief Petty Officer designated as the assistant Officer-in-Charge and a Corpsman who's off to the, out of the picture. And then all the Seabee rates were included. The other guy that we haven't talked about in the picture was a builder, second class builder. George Auxier and he lives in Florida. I saw him a year and a half ago, I guess. And he and the guy next to him— CM1 construction mechanic, first class— Green, Gus Green were both with me the previous year at a place called Phu Loc, which was a detachment from MCB-71. And that's how I knew too, that I wanted those guys to come with me.

And then the other guy that's in the picture up on the top there is BU2 Tom Kiefer, and he had been on—He had been in my company, the year before, but he was on a different detachment. So I knew in talking to the company commander. I knew of Tom Kiefer and I wanted him on it. The guy in front is UT1 John Pennington, he was our utilitiesman. And he was what they called an IPO. Actually, it's, I think the correct term was DPPO- Direct Procurement Petty Officer. And basically, they would take people that had experience. [inaudible] because there was such a need for Seabees. So he had actually been in the Navy before as a second or first class Petty Officer. He had been out for many years, but had the skills to come back in as a Seabee at the first

class rate. I can tell you the story of all the other guys that are not in the picture, too.

SIM: Yes, please do. Why don't I stop screen share.

SLETTEN: Okay. Yeah, there's 13 people on a Seabee team. And we, we went through I think, probably about four months of training in Davisville, Rhode Island where the battalion was home-ported. And because of the— we got to be very close in the four or five months of training. Some of that was field problems out in the woods, you know, where we would set up a camp and have projects to do and fend off the enemy and all that kind of stuff.

There was the language training, there was a survival— a one week survival what they call, it's called SERE, S-E-R-E. Survival, escape, resistance, and evasion. And this is for people that were likely to be, I think pretty much all air crew went through, and then people that were going to be out in the hinterlands on their own and stood a high likelihood of possibility of being captured. So teaching you how to cope or conduct yourself if you were in fact captured by the enemy.

SIM: And you went? [inaudible]

SLETTEN: I'm sorry?

SIM: And you went through this training?

SLETTEN: Yes, we did. All the Seabee teams did. All the Seabee teams that were bound for Vietnam went through this. And it was conducted up in Greenville, Maine— Rangeley [ME] up on the Canadian border. I always thought it was kind of ironic that we went through training up there in May, with a lot of snow on the ground. So as part of our training they issued us snow shoes. And they taught us how to survive. You know, we had to— in the deep winter— and less than a month later, we were in the tropics in Vietnam. [laughter] But yeah, it's quite an experience actually because, there's a lot of physical... they would hit you. And they would chase you through the woods and they threw you in— all people no matter how good that they were as far as the evasion part.

First, there was the survival part. They taught us how to set snares and catch birds and you know, survive [inaudible] no water and all that. Then there's the evasion part. And that's where you try to get away from guys that are chasing you around through the woods and even if you got to the goal, you still had to go into the prisoner of war camp and in the prisoner of war camp, that was where the resistance part came. And they taught us to organize ourselves by rank and date of rank. So the senior officer, no matter

who it was, would always step forward and speak for all the people that were in the camp. And, you know, as a relatively junior officer with a bunch of aviators, I thought things were fine but they went through all of them and got down to me. [laughter] And everybody else and you know... "who's in charge here?" "I am, sir." And they go, "Wah! No, you're not." [laughter] And send you flipping over the side, you know. And then various forms of simulated, but very realistic torture. And then the escape part where you know, they have the big rescue and all that kind of stuff. So it was a very— anybody that's been through SERE will have a very vivid memory of it.

SIM: Did you ever—

SLETTEN: [inaudible] even after all these years...

SIM: Did you ever, while you were going through SERE, think, [inaudible] "This might happen to me?"

SLETTEN: It was in the back of my mind, particularly because of where we were, not the first time, not my first trip because I was on a base. First, I was at a big combat base called Chu Lai. When you read the Cruise Book, that's where the battalion was. But after about, I think, I want to say maybe about six months, we went up to this detachment up near Hue. And that was a much smaller operation and I was surrounded by NVA [North Vietnamese Army]. So we always knew that stuff could happen and stuff did happen, some stuff. Never thought too much about being captured, but certainly being killed or wounded was a distinct possibility.

But then the second tour based on how few we were and where we operated, they could have had any one of us at any time, really, because we were out in villages, you know, way far away from anybody, anywhere. And it was because I think of the kind of work that we did. And the fact that we were relatively non-threatening. We were actually helping people in villages with buildings, farm to market roads, rice warehouses, things that were intended to improve their life. And I think to a certain degree, that gave us some insulation from really being bothered. And then also typically if it was in a, an area that was known to have a fair amount, or the possibility of enemy activity we would end up having local forces as, that would help guard us or guard our projects. What they call regional, RFPP- regional and provincial forces. And these were a lot of the locals, still wore black pajamas and they still had guns, [laughter] but they were our guys, you know, so...

So it was a, I guess, when we were going through the training, it was certainly, it made us think that it could happen, but I don't... one thing that you find is people that go to war, know that it's going to happen, you know, know that stuff happens. But it's like being an 18 year old. "It won't happen to me. If I drive along without my seatbelt at 100 miles an hour and that guy does, he might crash, but I'm never gonna crash." So, just kind of accepted that it's a possibility but you insulate yourself from thinking too much about it.

SIM: Wow.

SLETTEN: I don't know if that clarifies or whatever.

SIM: Yeah, I can't imagine.

SLETTEN: Hopefully, you know, as we go forward, there will be fewer people that will have to be involved in anything like that.

SIM: Yeah, I agree. Okay, well that was training. Why don't we just dive right in to your in-country work. So we kind of mentioned this before. But you served in three locations predominantly from my understanding. Was [sic] there any major differences that you saw between, you know, working in central Vietnam in Chu Lai and Phu Loc and more Southern Vietnam with Phuoc Tuy? Is that right?

SLETTEN: Yeah, I guess there were some differences. The short amount of time I spent at Chu Lai, that was a very large main combat base. And it had two Seabee battalions and had a Marine Air group. And it was also the headquarters for the Americal Army Division. So there were helicopters and you know, fighter jets and it was a huge place and probably the main...it was kind of ho hum in a lot of ways. In the sense that you did your job, you know, you went in, did your job and the only differences— we lived in tents and we had sandbag emplacements and it seemed as though every three or four days, there was a rocket attack and they would shoot 122 millimeter rockets into the base.

But it's sort of like if you think about the Dartmouth [Hanover, NH] campus. Okay, the Dartmouth campus is kind of large. So if you're over, by say, Thayer [Engineering School] or someplace, and the rockets are coming into Dartmouth, they might be down by the Hanover Inn or they might be up by the old Mary-Hitchcock [Memorial Hospital] or something. So the sirens would go off, you go into a foxhole somewhere and you'd hear explosions, but you didn't worry very much about it. And I don't think in the short time that I was there, I don't think any hit around our end of the camp.

And a lot of people didn't really get out of that environment, you know, they didn't go off base. They didn't encounter Vietnamese. They just did their job. They could have been anywhere.

When I moved up to Phu Loc which is near Hue— it's actually in northern South Vietnam— they call it Thua Tien province—

SIM: Could you spell that?

SLETTEN: Thua Tien, [inaudible] whatever, I think it's whatever province Hue city is in. There the war got closer because there were fewer of us. And I actually took the remnants of a platoon. The majority of my company had gone up to Tam Ky to build a hospital, a provincial hospital. So there were only a few, about a platoons worth of the company left and I took that group up to Phu Loc and we provided security for the base.

And so we were more in our infantry incarnation, rather than our building incarnation. And the main job of that place was, we were running a rock quarry and crusher. [inaudible] I think we were drilling into the side of a hill with rock drills and setting dynamite charges and setting those off and then hauling the resulting rocks to a crusher to make subbase for Route one, which is the main north-south route from the China border down to the delta in Vietnam. So we were responsible for a section from about Hue, south. And six years later, seven years later when the North Vietnamese finally took over Vietnam, I felt very proud that they were able to roll their tanks down that road that we built. [laughter] I say that facetiously, but anyway.

So I had my people out as perimeter patrols and security around our portion of the base. And we would encounter, you know, some Vietnamese out there, occasionally, but not too often. I had one of my men that was wounded by a booby trap out there. And contrary to Chu Lai when they sent, you know, rockets in, and it could be way over there or way over there. When we got mortars, they were right there. And we had a fair number of people that— we didn't have anybody that got killed but, we had several that were wounded. And as it turns out, in the six months or so that I was there, I think we had more people or as many people that were injured in construction accidents as were wounded by enemy action.

So in terms of the difference, one thing that I was able to do a couple of times, I got up to Hue City, and this was right probably about three, about four months after the Battle of Hue. It was an old imperial city— it was actually beautiful. You could imagine the emperors, back a thousand years ago, you know, out to the west

of the city where the old imperial tombs and all that sort of stuff. So you got a better sense of the way that the countryside was and the people lived and all that sort of stuff.

Also [I] went up to all the way up to the DMZ [Demilitarized Zone]. The Seabee, another unit of Seabees ran a rock crusher up on the DMZ and we traded spare parts periodically. And I also made several convoy runs down to Da Nang which was going to the big city, to get parts for equipment and stuff like that. So I got to see, you know, the countryside, the mountains. It's a beautiful country. It really is. And I think now 50 years later, it's really taken off in terms of tourism. And I always admired the people too. They were suffering through a lot, and they still were very— they were really— exhibited a lot of survival skills and a lot of industriousness or I don't know exactly how to put it.

The first time you know, it was the people were just there and there was a lot of callousness on the part of the Americans toward the Vietnamese. In fact, I hate to say it, but even some of our people. We were stuck down in this little place. So after things were a little bit stable, we would on Sunday afternoons, we would go, go ahead and send up a liberty party to the big city out at Phu Bai Base, you know, where they had an exchange and you could get a hot meal and stuff like that. And that was fine and of course they had clubs, so people could drink. [inaudible] Have drinking at our place and that was fine until you know, after three or four of those trips, somebody started— one of the Seabees started shooting up the countryside, you know, so he just— you know, he was drunk and he got properly chastised. But that ended the trips up there. And I guess I bring it up just to kind of demonstrate that on the part of a lot of people there was a fairly callous attitude and, you know, any Vietnamese was potentially an enemy and not to be trusted. And the second time that I was over there that attitude very much evaporated because we worked so closely with the Vietnamese and I got to like them as a people, very much.

SIM: [inaudible] With that Seabee that shot up you know the countryside and kind of ended things for your visits, when was this?

SLETTEN: Oh, I don't know, it was, it was a big deal. You know, he was, he went to captain's mast for it, and got punishment. And the worst part of it, actually one of the worst parts— well, maybe not the worst. But he came back and passed out and he still had a live round in his rifle, with the safety off. So, he was— he went to captain's mast and got punished. And it ended the trips. It was, I don't know when it was probably toward the end of the summer, early fall, maybe I don't remember.

- SIM: Was he part of MCB-71?
- SLETTEN: Yeah, he was one of ours, but he wasn't one of mine. He was one of the well, I say that because I had the security platoon. I had Charlie Company.
- SIM: Right.
- SLETTEN: Most of the people that work there were Alpha Company. They were equipment operators and mechanics. They were running the quarry and the equipment and all that. So he was one of theirs. You know we tried– the Officer-in-Charge was an Alpha Company guy. He was a lieutenant JG [junior grade], I was an ensign and we had two Chief Petty Officers and we had about a, I don't know how many, maybe about 100 people and you know, we tried to keep things together and sometimes stuff got away. We had fairly minimal discipline problems, but that was one and it just, I guess because it stood out– it was rare. And it was just as a demonstration that some people, anyway– and this guy was drunk– but some people didn't think much of the Vietnamese.
- SIM: Do you remember this Seabee's name?
- SLETTEN: No, I don't. I really don't. He wasn't in my company.
- SIM: Right. Okay. I'd like to backtrack a little bit and ask when you were in Phu Loc, you mentioned earlier that you were pretty much surrounded by the NVA, correct?
- SLETTEN: Well, they were all around us, we were– I think there was an artillery base maybe a few miles away, and then up in Hue, about 10, 15, 10 or 12 miles away. There were bases, but on one side of us was the South China Sea and Route One was right there and then all to the west, you know, north, west, and south was just open territory that it actually led up into the, I think, lead up into the A Shau Valley, which there was some fairly major battles fought up there.
- SIM: Could you please spell that Valley for me?
- SLETTEN: A-S-H-A-U. A Shau.
- SIM: Thank you.
- SLETTEN: And I remember there was a push. I guess it was, I don't remember who it was, the Army, but they wanted to set up a temporary refueling place at our place and they did for a few days because they had a big operation going on. We concerned ourselves with, you know, blowing up rock and crushing rock and

making sure that everybody tried to, you know, stay on task and be safe.

SIM: How many men were in your platoon?

SLETTEN: I took up to Phu Loc, I think I took about twenty, or twenty-five, somewhere in there.

SIM: And at this job of rock crushing, What was [sic] your primary responsibilities and duties?

SLETTEN: I just had the... my main thing was the security forces, so the platoon I took provided security around the operations. So we were manning listening posts and you know, outposts all around the perimeter. We had machine guns set up and that sort of thing.

SIM: Wow, okay. [pause] Well, I'd like to move on to your civic action missions during your second tour, in [19]69 until early 1970. Where were you, you were in South Vietnam?

SLETTEN: Right. We were in Phuoc Tuy Province. P-H-U-O-C. T-U-Y. And our place where we operated out of was the provincial capital called Phuoc Le. P-H-U-O-C, L-E. Phuoc Le. It's also, it might be shown on some old maps as Baria. It was also known as Baria, B-A-R-I-A. So it's kind of interchangeable.

SIM: Okay.

SLETTEN: So we operated, our area of operation was Phuoc Tuy Province.

SIM: And what was your overall mission?

SLETTEN: Our mission was threefold. All of the Seabee teams had the same mission. The overall mission was civic action. And that involved working directly with villages and small government entities on projects that were of interest or importance to them— construction projects. Secondly, we would conduct training in the construction trades. And most of our students were referred to us from elsewhere. Many of them were what they call Chieu Hoi. Have you ever heard of Chieu Hois?

SIM: No.

SLETTEN: Chieu Hoi was a, I guess a joint US-Vietnam, Vietnamese program where they would encourage enemy soldiers to desert, and they would drop little pieces of paper all over the countryside, they were called Chieu Hoi passes. And we actually captured one up at Phu Loc. Well, we didn't capture him, he turned himself in, a soldier with a Chieu Hoi pass. But a lot of our students were former Viet Cong or North Vietnamese Army soldiers. So they had decided

they didn't want to fight anymore, for whatever reason, and they would be referred to us and we would train them in some of the construction trades.

I had a fairly active welding program. Our steel worker had a sidekick that spent actually quite a long time with us learning welding. We had some mechanics. I don't recall that we had any equipment— we might have had some equipment operators. I don't believe we had any surveyors or plumbers, or electricians, we may have had one electrician. But we had several people and we had a syllabus and we would try to round it out. We modeled it after what the training for that particular Seabee rate was. And these guys were pretty good. They had some skills, you know, in terms of welding or learned how to do quite a bit with the equipment and stuff like that. So we had that part.

And then our third thing every Seabee team had a corpsman, a medical person. And we would do what they call “med caps,” where our corpsman would go out to a village, usually as part of a team. And in our case, in Phuoc Tuy province was also the area of operation for the Australia-New Zealand contingent that was in Vietnam. So our corpsman would go out with the medics from the Australian Army and they would do a— essentially a sick call out in a village where anybody and everybody could come with whatever complaints, you know, a splinter, a festering wound, a fever, a child with a cough or anything like that. And he did that quite a, quite a bit. His main job was to take care of all of us, you know. But, secondarily, he would do these medcap visits with the Australians. So that's what the, what the civic action teams were all about.

And at the height of the war, I think there were, I want to say there were 17 teams in South Vietnam, at one time, so we were scattered. Each of us had a province. And we were kind of scattered all over the lower portion of Vietnam— III and IV Corps. And we were, we answered to a headquarters that was in Saigon. So once a month, we would all converge on Saigon, and have a big meeting and a lot of—several teams, and mine included— I could actually get into Saigon, in about I want to say maybe about two hours or so. And there were probably half or more of the teams that were within driving range of Saigon, and then some of the other ones had to fly. I actually flew occasionally. But anyway, all the Seabee teams will get together and we actually checked in nightly by radio to update the headquarters on what we had been up to. And that's what it... [inaudible] was a pretty good, I was kind of pleased to be involved with them, with the Seabee teams.

SIM: Really?

SLETTEN: Yes.

SIM: Could I ask why? You felt like you were being productive—?

SLETTEN: I felt like instead of contrary to the first time where it was all about the war, you know, prosecuting the war— and in fact, the Seabee teams were called, or had an unofficial title of "goodwill ambassadors." So they say it was to win the hearts and minds of the people, but we were actually doing stuff other than trying to break things and hurt people and stuff like that. We were actually doing stuff that I felt maybe could help a little bit, you know, if we had to be there, at least this was something that felt a little better than just, you know, running around trying to try to break things and stuff. Yeah.

SIM: What did your day to day responsibilities look like?

SLETTEN: Well, I was the Officer-in-Charge. So— and we were a military and Navy unit. And we all lived in one place. In fact, we lived in the provincial capital right across the street from the provincial police headquarters. So that kind of made us feel a little bit better. So, at each corner of their place, they had machine guns, and they were often pointed at us, it seemed like, but we would start each day with a muster which every Navy unit in the world does, you know, what they call quarters, where you gather the people.

SIM: Hm.

SLETTEN: You make sure you got everybody and you make sure everybody's ready to go and you give them the orders of the day, or whatever. And then I would dispatch the people out to the various job sites. And most of the rest of my day was spent either going from job site to job site, with one of the other Seabees or sometimes my assistant Officer-in-Charge and the interpreter.

I spent a fair amount of time up at the provincial headquarters mostly with American counterparts, but every province, all 44 provinces in Vietnam had a provincial advisor who was usually an American Army Colonel. He had a staff and that staff looked at things like agriculture and police and civic action and various other things, and there were also some miscellaneous Army units that were involved or other types of military units that were involved in various aspects of pacification in the provinces. So I would spend a bit of time up with them, looking at, you know, projects that were on the project list and whether or not that was something suitable for my team or some combination of my team and Vietnamese or whatever. And fair amount of time in reporting back, you know, documenting and reporting and that sort of thing.

And always, we have the day to day, just sustainment stuff, you know, we made sure [inaudible] stayed fed and stayed, you know, happy. All that sort of stuff. So it's the normal juggling or management of a group of a little construction company out in a, you know, with the jobs, the training the medcaps. The interface with the other people, reporting back to headquarters in Saigon. The documenting with photographs and reports and all that. So it was busy, it was a busy time.

SIM: Can you tell me a little bit about specific projects you worked on?

SLETTEN: I can. We did at least several roads, what they typically would call farm-to-market roads. Some of these villages— a village would typically be subdivided into hamlets, and there could be several, you know 2, 3, 4 different hamlets that would constitute a village, and some of them were actually rather remote. And most of these people were farmers of various kinds, you know, rice, primarily, but other stuff too. And when they—beyond subsistence, it was their means of making a living. So they once they got their crop in, they had to get it to market and sell it. So we would do road improvements.

We did some rice warehouses. We did some well work, we did some laying out of other types of buildings. I don't recall that we did a lot of equipment work. We did some electrical work. But some of our projects were kind of long term— not long term— but they would stretch out over a period of time. And we would usually have— I would usually have one or two Seabees on a project and as many as 6, 7, 8 Vietnamese. The Vietnamese were typically from the village or were our trainees. So a lot of that would be what you might call on-the-job training like bricklaying, like plastering, like laying out of buildings.

We did two —no, three projects that were funded by the central Vietnamese— South Vietnamese government and they were called information reading rooms or something. They were a place to put—for the government to post propaganda and stuff and they were the only projects that were bothered. All three of them were blown up. [laughter] But any of the rest of the projects that we worked on, you know, they were not bothered typically, and it used to bother me or used to very much weigh on me if I had one Seabee out 15 miles away all by himself with just Vietnamese PF [Popular Force] forces as his security and he would be out there with his road grader and working on a road with you know, with his companions there and stop and take tea in somebody's house and you know... but we got through it, you know. I think [inaudible] Sometimes I think back on some of that. And I'm not sure exactly how we got through some of those things.

SIM: Really?

SLETTEN: Yeah, it was. We— I think all of us felt pretty good when the, when the tour ended. Many years went by and we didn't, we weren't in touch with each other, but one guy, our, what is called an Engineering Aid- the engineering aid trade is both surveyors and draftsman, they're kind of the intellectuals of the Seabees, if you will. [laughter] He ended up out in grad school out in Hawaii and stayed there forever, and he was kind of a computer-type nerd and he started getting us all back together. And eventually we got 10, I think 10 of the 13 of us back together.

SIM: Wow.

SLETTEN: And there were a couple that for many years did not want to be involved or participate or whatever. But eventually, every two years, the battalion would have a reunion and I never went to any reunions until I guess probably sometime in the [19]90s and then we started finding our team members. So eventually we would sort of have our own mini Seabee team reunions. And the last one was last September in San Antonio [TX]. And we were planning on doing it again this year in Branson, Missouri. And then Tom [Seman] got sick and, you know, COVID [COVID-19] came and all of us are in minimum in our 70s, few, couple, three of them I think are in their 80s. And most are in pretty good shape, but they're pretty old. And even before Tom got sick, you know, we were saying, "I'm not sure about this," then he got sick and it just, you know—we didn't do it.

SIM: I'd like to go back. I would love to revisit this topic, but to go back, I would love to share my screen once more, and show you what I found. In terms of one of your projects that you mentioned— does this look familiar to you? This says this was a... Information Service reading room, that you mentioned just now. Do you remember this construction project?

SLETTEN: I certainly do. The main reason I remember it is because the arched roof— the reinforced concrete arched roof was quite challenging for us, to figure out engineering-wise. How to put the reinforcing steel rod in it and actually make the forms for the roof. The bottom of it was actually pretty straightforward, but this is, this is one of the, I don't know where this one was, I know we did one in Binh Ba, one in Binh Gia. I think we did, did we do...? The other two VIS [Vietnamese Information Service] structures had pre-cast concrete domes. So getting that pre-cast concrete dome was quite a challenge, but these are what I told you— the only projects that ever got bothered.

SIM: Why do you think that was the case? [inaudible]

SLETTEN: Well, they said– we left one day, and when we came back the next day, it had been blown up and it had been collapsed, you know, was on the ground. And as it turned out, they [NVA] had actually set a couple of booby traps in the wreckage, which we, one of my guys discovered by accident. We called in a mine sweeping team, you know, to probe for it. But they didn't come and you know, I got out there and we poked all around and everything like that and finally decided, well, I guess we'll go to work and I stayed around for a while, while the crew went back to work.

And then I left to go on to another job and found out later that they had discovered a hand grenade and that the pin had been pulled out of it. And it was laid on its spoon, so that if you, you know, you're taking the wreckage away and all that sort of stuff, and then if you kick it so it falls onto its side, the spoon flies off and it goes boom. And all that happened, except the boom, it was a dud.
[laughter]

SIM: And how did that feel for you? [inaudible]

SLETTEN: Yeah, it haunts me a little bit to this day that I gave them the go ahead to, you know, thinking that we had poked around enough to satisfy me [and] that it was safe to proceed, and it was not safe. And it was just... sheer luck that it wasn't worse and... so out of all the projects we did, that was probably the only one that bothered. We had a few other incidents, but for the most part, we were, we operated in autonomy and always looking over your shoulder, but pretty safely.

SIM: I'd like to learn a little bit more about some of these close calls you've had besides this one.

SLETTEN: There weren't many, you know, I mean, I wasn't a combat guy or anything like that. It was a war and stuff happens. I mentioned the rocket attacks in Chu Lai and I didn't consider any of those particularly close. We had one mortar attack, in particular in Phu Loc that wounded, I think about 10 people and that was pretty close, you know, that really got a lot of people's attention.

SIM: Yeah.

SLETTEN: And a funny side on that. Three or four– the rest of that night we had flares, you know, we had flares over the place and which to me seemed to light us up in case they wanted to, you know, keep going. But they fired, I don't know 35 or 40 mortars, 82 millimeter mortars into us and we had four of our own. We had a mortar tip with four and mortars in it and we fired back many mortars, kind of

after the fact. [laughter] And, you know, the place was lit up and the corpsman that I took the following year, he was busy with the wounded and we had Medevac choppers coming in and all that. And then the people that were less serious, the next day, they were put on the road, up to Phu Bai [Combat Base]. And it, you know, wrecked some stuff and hurt some people and reminded you that this is real war, you know. And there were some booby traps. One of my guys encountered a booby trap.

And there wasn't a lot of small arms fire that I can recall, there was some every so often, you'd hear some taunting on the radio, particularly at night when I was checking in with my— somebody would come on and say mean stuff about Seabees. [laughter] And you know... but a funny aside to that. Funny, I mean, "haha."

After several weeks, two or three weeks, I think. Three or four, I think maybe four of those guys that had been Medevac'ed came back. And sometime after that, our CO [Commanding Officer] came back from Chu Lai. And he was on a, you know, just going around to the detachments and making a show. And part of it was to hand out awards and part of it was to conduct, what we call captain's mast, which is what... in the UCMJ [Uniform Code of Military Justice] it's non-judicial punishment. So the captain— somebody is written up for a violation and at a certain level, what you might call misdemeanor type things— the captain has the authority to hear the case and make a judgment and impose punishment.

So, he came up and you know, we had a little ceremony and he handed out Purple Hearts to those guys. And then he held mast, you know, for people that have been written up and two of the guys showed up still wearing their Purple Hearts. [laughter] And what happened was that on their way back from the hospital, they decided to take a little unauthorized trip and spend a little extra time somewhere along the way. I don't know where. Yeah, I still remember, he said, "Boy, you really know how to hurt a guy, don't you?" [laughter]

But there weren't many, you know, and compared to guys that were in infantry battalions or something like that. It was, it was not like being on a, you know, on a big base all the time or anything, but it was, I think the possibility, the likelihood was not as great as for some other types of professions, but the possibility was always there, something you just lived with. Even on the monthly trips to Saigon. You're always looking all around because it's like, "Whoa, what's that?" They're drying rice on the road. Well, oftentimes, they would put booby traps. So you don't want to be driving through that rice and you hear stuff off in the distance and you come across

places that have been, you know, last night were blown up or you hear somebody that you know is not there anymore, you know, stuff like that so compared to other people, I don't feel like I had really fear— I did not end up with PTSD or anything like that. I had some regrets about the overall mostly about our country's involvement. But my own personal involvement, if it had to happen, it was... I did okay with it, if that makes sense.

SIM: Yeah, that does. That completely makes sense. We're coming on about 90 minutes here. So if you would like to take— I'm not done with all my questions.

SLETTEN: Okay, that's fine.

SIM: You can keep on trucking along, but we can also take a couple minutes if we need a water break or anything like that. It's up to you.

SLETTEN: I guess I'm okay. How much longer do you anticipate we'll be going?

SIM: I can't say, probably maybe another half hour?

SLETTEN: Okay, that's fine. That's fine.

SIM: Sure. We'll see, we'll see where the

SLETTEN: I'm enjoying your company. But, you know,

SIM: Of course,

SLETTEN: [inaudible] Your questions I hope.

SIM: [I'm sure] it's exhausting. Yeah. Well, I just wanted to kind of shift gears a little bit and talk a lot about, or talk a little about your personal relationships that you forged with the Vietnamese when you were in-country during your second tour doing the civic action missions. Can you tell me a little bit about friends you made or enemies you made?

SLETTEN: Nothing that lasted, I guess is the first thing to say. At the time, you know, the first tour, we were, we didn't encounter Vietnamese. I think some Army units, they would hire people to come on and clean hooches and all that— we didn't have any of that stuff. We didn't have any Vietnamese to cook for us or clean for us, or did any of that stuff.

The second tour with the Seabee team, we did. We had a lady that cooked for us. She lived in town, and she came every day. And surprisingly, we called her Mama-San. I don't remember her name,

but that's what we called her and she was, she was very dignified and very sort of semi-motherly to us, you know, she was, I don't know how old she was probably in her 40s, say, and she had some kids that she would bring occasionally, and the guy that did most of our provisioning, in other words, that helped make out the menus and go up to Phu Bai and get the food and all that sort of stuff. He was quite close to her, in the sense that they worked together, you know, they planned. And of course, the interpreter Lamy, Alfred, we were fairly close to him. He was, he was a young guy. I don't know. He was about our age, you know, 20, 22, 23, 4. And he was a little bit rambunctious you would say. He rode a motor scooter around and you know, he would cruise up.

We had some people— I don't remember— I know when I first got there, the team that we relieved at that site, it was an on-site relief [inaudible] so they had kind of opened up the compound to let Vietnamese come on, and they would come over and watch movies at night and stuff like that. And after a few weeks, I felt like it was really kind of getting out of hand because I couldn't keep track of who was and who wasn't there, and what the relationships were. So I stopped it. I didn't let it happen anymore. I guess I took a little bit of heat from that initially, but I had a guy, that on one of our more recent reunions confirmed to me that he thought that was the right thing to do because we didn't know who these people were, whether they were not nice people. I mean, they acted nice and everything, but we didn't know what their relationships were or anything.

And then for a while anyway, I hired some guards. We had a watch section set up. We would close our gate at night and we always had somebody on watch. And the watches were I think, four hours. So from say, eight to noon— eight to midnight, midnight to four and four to eight, roughly. So, a third of the team— and I put myself on the watch list too— but a third of the team basically was on watch every third day, you know, so there was a lot. And then we would hire— I did hire some guards for the front, you know, to, to be on watch and some of those were, I found out later, were Nung. You ever heard of Nungs? They're Chinese [inaudible]. And they were supposed to be pretty good, but they came back one night from having been at a meeting or something. And our guard that was on was asleep.

You know, he had his 50 year old carbine sitting across his lap, and he was just kind of asleep. So anybody could have you know, waltzed into the place. So I fired him, right on the spot. I said, "Leave." And that did not sit well, I mean I heard about that a little bit, but I don't think after that that we hired any local guards.

So, and then, of course, the villagers themselves. As a project was underway, we had a relationship, you know, we would develop a relationship, but it was more of a working relationship. We would get invited occasionally to do something social like have tea, or, I had a couple of meals, I think, at a village chief's house. But nothing that lasted. It was, it was in the moment and for the job and respectful and cordial, but not lasting beyond our departure.

SIM: Did you feel like your work, doing these civic action missions, made a major impact, either in your province with the villagers or in the grander scheme of the war?

SLETTEN: It was personally kind of satisfying. But in terms of effect on the overall war, I probably would say no, not really. [pause] It was a worthy thing to try, but I'm not sure that it could have ever made enough headway to really make a difference, if you know what I mean. There was so much emphasis on, you know, this destruction, really, destroying the enemy. So the building or showing a better life was... always seemed to me almost an afterthought. I mean, that's what the war was supposedly about, to prevent those Northerners, those mean, rotten Communist Northerners from taking over and ruining people's lives, but the fighting was so— there was so much emphasis on the fighting part of it and the people mostly innocent and many— most I would say probably apolitical and not really caring, you know, just don't have it around here. That without more emphasis on that and on making a better life for the people, the less antagonistic or combat type things didn't have as much of a chance, have as much emphasis or the way that the war was fought was fighting, you know. It wasn't civic action, that stuff was secondary.

SIM: And you felt this way in-country doing these missions?

SLETTEN: I felt like we were, if not, we were not doing anything negative and in our own small way and in our own small place we were doing some things that were positive. But at the end of the time that I was there, they knew that some Americans were not out to get them or wreck their place or whatever, and in fact, really were earnest and trying to help. But then we left. And even though— my team was replaced by another team— at the end of another six or eight months, eventually we left for good. You know, I thought about it way more after the fact than I did while I was involved in it.

And in some ways, I guess it was almost inevitable that it would have happened that the war would happen, but in most ways, I just don't see the sense of it. I don't understand. In retrospect, what we actually thought we would accomplish and you know, history is, you're a history major. [laughter] History has practically shown that

the country did fine after the fact. That the fact that we lost the war has not proven overly detrimental to the country as a whole.

Now, the people that were involved in the war, way back then, particularly on the losing side, they went through some stuff after the fact. But I have not been back. I joined a Veterans book group at the VA here, and so we would read books and get together once a week during the fall and talk about the books that we read, most— all about war. And several of those guys have been back and now it's been what, 45? Yeah, 45 years since it really ended in [19]75. Most of the majority of the population has no memory. No more memory of the war than you do, because you know, they were born after the war ended. So, they know only the aftermath, what it is now. And I suppose nominally it's a Communist country. But in fact, people are, you know, live okay lives there as far as I can tell. I have not been back but the people that have been back report, tell me that they're doing okay. They're doing really well. And to a certain extent. I think that's the character of the Vietnamese people, you know, resilient and tough and resourceful. You know, they really, I mean, they beat us in a war. [laughter] So they got something going for them. [laughter]

SIM: You haven't been back. But did you, or do you want to go back?

SLETTEN: I thought about it for a while. For a long time, I wanted to, well, I went all over the world elsewhere. I went to China and Australia and Europe and Africa, and all over the place. And it was sort of on my mind that at some point maybe I'd like to, but I wanted my wife to go with me. I wanted her to see. And at some point, I think I realized that even if I went back to the places that had been meaningful to me, then, I probably wouldn't even recognize— I would not even be able to show where my hooch had been or where my project was or you know, where that thing was so involved with way back that happened. So it got less important to me and now I'm kind of old enough that I probably won't go back.

SIM: A couple questions more I'd like to ask. So when you came home, what was the reception like? Where did you go home, where was home for you at this point? And, yeah.

SLETTEN: That's interesting. Um, I came back. One thing about the Seabees and actually most Navy units— sorry I'm getting a little hoarse— we rotated as units. So we did not come and go, individually, the way the Army guys did. And so I came back with my battalion, the first time and I came back with my team the second time. And I still had almost a year to go in the service on my obligation. So I did not get out right away.

I ended up being stationed in Rhode Island at Davisville, 'till November of 1970 so I was back and I did not want to be there. I wanted to be out of the service. And I, I got—I ended up with a job, a lot of people that were coming back as they were winding down the war in 1970, they were coming back and they were decommissioning battalions and sending all the people out to civilian life and I thought, you know, "Me, me, me!" But I had a job where I was training Seabee teams to go either to Vietnam or we were just starting to send teams to what they call the Trust Territories of the Pacific. So these are the islands of Micronesia, they've actually been in the news lately. Yap, Tinian I forget several islands there. So I was training Seabee teams and they weren't gonna let me out until my service ended. So in some ways I was a little bit insulated. I did live off base, but I was still in the military, so I couldn't grow long hair, protest or do anything like that.

I bought another motorcycle. So I drove around on a motorcycle. Wrecked a couple of cars— well, I wrecked one car. But I did meet my wife, you know, after I'd been back about three months and we met in a bar. [laughter] And almost 50 years later, we're still together. So, good came out of that and I was trying to figure out, okay, "What am I going to do after I get out?", because, you know, by the end of 1970, I was going to be out. And you know, I thought, well, I could look for a job. But in the end, somewhere along the way, I decided I wanted to go back to graduate school.

So I started applying for jobs. Marriage was not on my horizon at that point, up to the time that I left to go back, left to leave the service. And so I left and I went back to New Mexico. My parents had settled in New Mexico. And had applied to these schools. And I'd been accepted to a couple and decided I could not live without, you know, my wife. So I went back to Rhode Island and in the airport, I said, "Well, what do you think, you want to get married?" And she said, "I'll think about it." [laughter]

But in the end, yeah, we got married and so I originally decided I would go back to Oregon State for graduate school, but she— my wife— was in a program at Boston University and they had almost the identical program at the University of Washington in Seattle [WA]. So we had all our stuff, I had all my stuff sent out to Corvallis [OR], and then we were there a couple or three days and we ended up getting a U-Haul trailer and going up to Seattle. And getting an apartment there and starting school there. So we each got a master's degree— we were there for a year and a half. And we got a master's degree and this is a roundabout way about attitudes and things like that.

So when I was finishing my undergraduate degree in [19]67, people were coming on campus and they were recruiting and you know, they were—you know, job offers all over the place. I had a lot of job offers and I ended up going in the service. And then in [19]72 when I was finishing up with my master's in Civil Engineering, I did a resume and it turns out that I had— it was very hard to get a job. I sent resumes all over the place. People weren't hiring or I, I don't know what it was. I could not get hardly any offers. And somewhere along the line, and it might have been during graduate school, there were a few veterans there. They said, "Yeah, don't tell them you were in Vietnam." So on the resume, it just sort of is a, you know, in the military, but nothing about Vietnam or being in-country or anything like that, just playing it down and I ended up finally getting an offer. Two offers— a couple, three offers. I had a couple of interviews. And it turns out that they were all actually with the government, even though I had sent a bunch of resumes to private companies. And I finally ended up taking one in Philadelphia [PA] and after two years, transferred up to Hanover [NH] to work at CRREL [Cold Regions Research and Engineering Laboratory].

SIM: To work at CRREL?

SLETTEN: Yep.

SIM: Could you tell me a little bit about when that was and what that company was for you?

SLETTEN: Do you know CRREL? Cold Regions Research Lab?

SIM: No, [inaudible]

SLETTEN: Okay. Um, I went to work in Philadelphia [PA] in the fall of 1972 And I worked at the Philadelphia District of the Corps of Engineers, the Army Corps of Engineers. And basically it was water resources, you know, I was doing lakes, reservoir studies, lakes studies, hydrologic stuff, environmental impact statements and things like that. But I am not a city guy. I did not like being in the city. And the main reason we left Seattle— I like Seattle okay, but we were in college. So that was all right.

But the main reason was, we came back to the east coast, because my wife was from Rhode Island. So we got on the east coast, but didn't like the city and then found the job up in Hanover and that's also part of the Army Corps of Engineers and it's the Cold Regions Research and Engineering Laboratory. Yeah, so it's called Cold Regions Research is what that place is all about. And that's where I stayed and the first half of my career was involved in

research— environmental engineering and cold regions. And then the second half, I was more of an administrator. I ran the Safety and Environment Office.

So, and then I retired in 2004. And I don't know if you were going to ask this or not. When I went to graduate school, I ended up going back into the Reserve, the Naval Reserve. When you first sign on, it's actually for, I think, eight years and that's some combination of Active Duty and Reserve and most of the time, you don't have to do anything. You're sort of in the Reserve force, but you don't have to drill or anything. But if you do go back into the Active Reserve and do drilling, you get paid. And I was a graduate student. So I had a fellowship, I had the GI Bill, I managed the apartment and still needed some extra money so I ended up going back into the Reserves. And at the time, it was just, sort of, you know, make some money and even though being in the military wasn't terribly popular in 1971 and [19]72, it was okay, I guess.

And then when I went to, when we left graduate school and went to Philadelphia, for the first little while I wasn't in the Reserves, but then a guy that I work with knew that I had been in and started recruiting me and ended up in the Reserves there too. So, to make a long story short, I ended up putting in a full career in the Reserves. And I'm actually retired from the government, the civil service. I'm also a retired Naval Officer.

SIM: Wow. One curious question that I had was when you were in the Reserves or after you came home, how did you feel, and how do you feel now about the anti war movement, about the protesters? What did you take away from your service with all these, you know, social tensions during the time?

SLETTEN: Yeah. And I thought about it. I think I'm not really ideological and in retrospect, I think that the domino theory and Communism and all that sort of stuff is, was somewhat overblown. You know, there's no question that we were in a competition, I guess with Russia, in particular, and later, China. And we had interests all around the world, but I, I was, I never had an issue with being ready to be called back. In fact, I was put on alert for the Gulf War, the 1990 Gulf War. We weren't called to Active Duty but several of our— several units like mine were, and I was taking the buck. So I was prepared to do what it took.

I never really had a huge issue with protesters. I kind of thought that, you know, it's their right to do it. I don't think that it's proper to shut them down unless they're breaking things, or, you know, totally disrupting the society or whatever. And even now with, you know, the Black Lives Matter [Movement] and all that kind of stuff. I

think it's good for our society as a whole. It advances those types of causes and makes us have to look at ourselves.

Why do we, why do we get involved in all these wars? You know, that's not— I'm perfectly happy to be part of the military if it's preventing war [inaudible] but sometimes I think the politicians look at this big bright shiny expensive military and say, "Hm." It's the first tool they go for when there's some sort of altercation or whatever. It's the, it's the handiest and the most visible when in actual fact, I think we could be a lot more effective with, you know, soft diplomacy, cultural things, just flat out negotiating and diplomacy. Not a huge reason to get involved in shooting wars, I don't think, and it just pains me to think of the stuff, particularly the second Gulf War, Desert Storm? Not Desert Storm— the Iraq War. Afghanistan, I can probably justify that although it should have been an in and out, you know, we shouldn't have been involved in... you should not still be there almost 20 years later, 19 years later. Iraq, at the time, I still trusted the government and if people like Colin Powell [former Secretary of State] and all the supposed professionals are saying, "This really is real." You know, I got fooled, along with huge numbers of other people, and the majority of the Senate.

And I just think we should be a lot more leery about committing and getting involved in these things. You think about the money that we have spent in Iraq and Afghanistan and alas, since 2001, and what that money could have [done] if we weren't involved in that, what we could have bought, like health care for everybody in the country. Education, poverty, you know, those are the important things. It is this constant getting involved in the world, all over the world, for reasons that sometimes escape me.

I, I just— you know, I read letters in The Valley News. Did you ever get The Valley News when you were here? Okay. It's a dying paper, I'm sorry to say, but it's our local hometown horrifier. And so there's always Hometown News, my kids were in the sports section and stuff like that. But anyway, there are certain people around here over in Hartford [VT] and Lyme [NH] and out in Stratford [NH] and places like that, that they're the real reliable letter writers. Some of them are old. Not that I'm not, they're really set in their ways. I mean, the same theme every time, you know. "How can we allow people to kneel when the [National] Anthem is played," and stuff like that. And I just, you know, I don't want to be one of those kind of old people. [laughter] But anyway, that's, life after.

You know, for a long time, I couldn't stop thinking about the war. And I had some substance issues— alcohol. And at some point I

decided that I needed— it was behind me and it's done. And I very consciously, probably about 20 years ago, said, "I'm done with it. I'm not going to talk about it anymore. I'm not going to think about it. It's it, it happened. It was there, it's done, it's over. I'm done." And you know, at some point, when I got control of myself and I quit drinking, I've had a really good life, you know. Great kids. Best wife. [pause] That's that. [pause] [inaudible] Uh-huh. So anyway, that's, that's how things are. Did I answer, did I help? [laughter]

SIM: You most certainly did. You know, I think I'm all wrapped up on questions, but I would love to, you know, give you the final say if there's anything else you wish to tell me or the [Dartmouth] Vietnam [Project] archive. The floor is yours.

SLETTEN: Um, it's, I'm torn. On the one hand, I'm proud of my service. I'm proud to be a veteran. I can't imagine if I wasn't what I would feel like. I regret that it was, that the war itself was, turns out not to have been worthy of the sacrifice that the guys that didn't make it back or that curated for the rest of their lives made for it.

But I guess if I had it to do all over again. I don't know that I would change anything, I would still have volunteered. I never had deep discussions with my dad about that kind of stuff. He was in that one and his own back in World War Two. Like I said, my grandfather was, you know, we've only been in this country a little over 100 years but we've been in all the wars and it's just something that you do. It's the way I grew up. It was not an, not really— I didn't perceive it to be much of an option to not go.

I knew I did have the option, but somehow I would think less of myself, I think if I, if I hadn't— if I'd have done a Donald Trump, you know, and looked for the bone spurs or something. I don't, that's not a good enough excuse. Now, I don't have any issue with the guys that went to Canada. Or Muhammad Ali, for that matter. Muhammad Ali is kind of a hero. He said— you know about him? His story?

SIM: Not much.

SLETTEN: Okay. He was the heavyweight champion of the world, right? He was a, he was a loudmouth. I don't know who you'd compare him to now. But he was the mouth that roared, and a lot of people didn't like him. He was black, and he was brash and he was super good at what he did and he was drafted. He was drafted for the military. And he said, "I'm not going. I will not go." And they said, "Then you'll be charged with draft dodging or draft evasion." And he was [charged]. He stood up for his principles and said, "I don't care what you do to me. I am not going over to that country and

kill, kill people. When I can't even get the respect in my own country." And they stripped him of— they threatened— and I think he was convicted at a trial, and he was stripped of his heavyweight boxing title and not allowed to box for a number of years. He had conviction and he stood by it and you can't help but admire people like that, in my opinion.

So I don't have any real issues with the guys that went on principle, particularly if they were willing to do alternate service, you know, go into the Peace Corps or do something else. Guys that just look for an excuse, you know, got a friendly doctor or said, you know, "I'm not going to go because somebody else can go get killed. I'm too important to go get killed." Those kinds of guys, I don't care too much for. The guys that did it on principle, didn't go and did it on principle or you know, a lot of guys, in spite of how compelling it was, you know, the draft hung over everybody. Lots of guys ended up going. They volunteered to avoid the draft and get a better job or they just— but a lot of guys were never called or they were legitimately not eligible to go. I don't have any problem with those people.

So, I guess like I said, I think I'm kind of proud that I did it, that I went and did service for the country. Whether the country needed that service or not— is debatable. And in retrospect, probably we didn't. I don't know how we could have not been involved in the war. If we were smarter about it or just didn't say that it was that big of a threat to us, which I think a lot of the things that we get involved in now, the threat is kind of overblown to what it really the danger to the country is, I'd like to think at some point, you know, these big, bloated defense budgets will go down and some budgets for other stuff will go back up. [laughter] So that's it. That's what I got to say.

SIM: Thank you so much for sharing your story. [inaudible] I really appreciate the time. I'll stop recording right now if that's okay.

SLETTEN: Okay.

[end of interview].