Michael Heaney
Dartmouth College Oral History Program
The Dartmouth Vietnam Project
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Transcribed by David Velona '21

HEANEY: Okay.

VELONA: This is David Velona. Today is October 27th, 2020 and I'm conducting this oral history interview for the Dartmouth Vietnam Project. I'm conducting this interview by Zoom video call with Mr. Mike Heaney. I am near the campus of Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, and Mr. Heaney speaking to me from West Windsor, Vermont. That's right?

HEANEY: That's right.

VELONA: And so, Mr. Heaney thank you very much for speaking with me today. I really appreciate it.

HEANEY: You're welcome. Thanks for giving me the opportunity to speak.

VELONA: Of course.

HEANEY: I appreciate it, too.

VELONA: So, I'd like to begin just with some basic background information. When and where were you born?

HEANEY: I was born in Elizabeth, New Jersey. On January 31, 1943, which makes me 77.

VELONA: 77 years young. Okay, great. And can you tell me a little bit about life in Elizabeth, New Jersey and your family?

HEANEY: Sure, I was born sort of halfway through World War II and when I was born, my dad was overseas. He was a fighter pilot, stationed of all places in India, in support of the British. My mother at the time and my grandparents all lived in a house in Rosedale Park, New Jersey, which is near Elizabeth, where I was born, and we lived there till my dad came home from the war. He then, long story short, went to law school became a lawyer, and move to another part of New Jersey. A little idyllic town called Basking Ridge [NJ]. And we led a pretty typical, for the time white middle class family, which characterizes Basking Ridge, New Jersey pretty well. I don't remember ever seeing a black person growing up, until I got to high school in in the flesh. Things were pretty segregated there and all over. Not legally separated but as a practical matter.

VELONA: Right.

HEANEY: So, now, David, I think I told you when we were talking that I went through a pretty severe medical crisis this year.

VELONA: Right.

HEANEY: Maybe I didn't tell you. Involving a systemic infection in my thorax, let's call it. My chest. It was such a painful thing that I got a lot of opiates and I was out cold for about a week. The reason I'm telling you this is because one of the consequences of all the drugs I took was a little bit of cognitive dysfunction and memory loss. So sometimes I will lose my train of thought and you'll have to remind me what I was talking about.

Velona: Sure.

HEANEY: Or I start out with this great thesis I want to, you know, give to you and people who may be watching this, and I totally forget what I was talking about.

VELONA: Right.

HEANEY: I just, I put that out there. It's easier to put that out there than to keep saying, “oh, I lost my train of thought,” and you'll see. And you can help me out. But I, I have very clear memories of the stories I'm going to tell you because they were pretty traumatic, frankly.

VELONA: Yes, I appreciate you for sharing that with me. And for the record, I think it's important to say that and, you know, we're in this one together. So, I will happily help you out when needed.

HEANEY: Thank you. So, I may not have finished the answer, you'd asked me about my family and starting out in New Jersey?

VELONA: Right. We. So, would you mind just stating your parents’ names?

HEANEY: No, I wouldn't mind. They're both deceased now. My mother was Helen A. Heaney and my dad was Herbert M. Heaney.

VELONA: Okay, and so you talked about how your father was a fighter pilot and then a lawyer. How did your mother spend her time?

HEANEY: She had a fairly traditional life is as life is lived for Americans in the ‘50s and ‘60s. And she went to college. She went to Bucknell. That's where she met my dad. But he obviously finished, he went on to law school afterwards. This was right after the war. Mom did a couple of years and then her parents, my grandparents, were struggling to rebuild a life after World War II and after the Great Depression. And so, the family didn't have a lot of extra money and they just couldn't afford to keep my mother in school, in college, Bucknell. So, she left after her first two years and my parents got married on

the eve of my dad's going on to active duty in the Army Air Force. And she lived those four years with her parents, my grandparents and she had me in 1943. And I'm just trying to think what she did, that was – well, like most women at the time who were her age, she was married young. Divorce was much less common in those days, than it is today.

So, everybody on our street in Basking Ridge [NJ], where my parents bought their first house. Almost all the families had been involved in the war to one extent or another. And Mom continued to have two more children and live in a nice middle class house in Basking Ridge [NJ] and those are pretty happy times, certainly happy for me. And the block we lived on was what you would today call a subdivision, a lot of cookie cutter houses that all look pretty much the same. And lots of kids on the block. War babies, including myself, and mom was a traditional homemaker and mother. And we had a lot of friends, most of whom were vets.

I remember Dad talking with his buddies – veteran buddies a lot about their respective experiences during the war, but that didn't cast a pall on us kids. We tried to overhear anything we could when Dad and his friends were talking about the war. That fascinated us as kids. Dad never glorified the war. In fact, he didn't particularly like to talk about it, but all the kids my age with their own fathers and family members if they were involved in any way in World War II, they tried to get as much information as they could about it. It's just a thing that interests young boys, particularly in those days. And I would say I had a happy childhood, typical for kids of that time.

VELONA: So, did you ever – you mentioned that it's typical for young boys to be interested in in war or warfare and that your friends had tried to get war stories from their fathers. Do you have any memories of asking your father about the war and his reactions to it?

HEANEY: Yeah, I do. And that was aided greatly by the fact that my dad was a pretty articulate guy, he liked to tell stories, and he also kept a daily or near-daily a combat journal. It was a diary. He let me read that soon as I was up to it. And I would then ask him questions that occurred to me based on reading – I probably read it dozens of times, I was so fascinated with a with the whole thing. In that day and age, there wasn't the sort of taboo or near taboo there is today, if you're not a gun guy, raising your child with a lot of cowboy costumes, cops and robbers, Americans and you know GI Joe and the Japs, as we called them in those days. Or the Nazis. And so I think that role playing as kids do, young boys, especially – what am I, losing my train of thought. It'll come to me. There wasn't a taboo at all about playing with guns and dressing up to look like a gun wielder. It was all fun for us, and we would have these long dramatic death scenes when the good guys sometimes had to bite the bullet and die.

VELONA: Right, right.

HEANEY: But ironically, and maybe counter-intuitively it was a very happy time. I felt secure as a child. We did the standard nuclear bomb drills. Atom bomb drills that you

see on television now, where we were supposed to duck and cover and get under our desks in case of a nuclear attack. And we'd be fine, the teachers would tell us. I think most of the teachers knew we wouldn't be fine in an atomic attack. We felt. "Hey, that's what our adult role models are telling us, so that, of course, must be true. And we're the greatest nation on earth."

VELONA: So, you –

HEANEY: Go ahead.

VELONA: So, you took the teachers for their word that that the desk would shield you from the blast?

HEANEY: Yes, yes, the only other thing we did was, if we had warning that an atomic attack was coming, we would all push the desks and chairs up against a wall, and that was supposed to give us additional protection and we sort of giggled our way through it, it was a great adventure, nobody thought the bombs would do us in.

VELONA: Right.

HEANEY: My dad, there was a bridge near the center of town where we lived that my dad would endlessly point out to me because he loved the signage. And this sign said, “In case of nuclear attack, drive off bridge.” [laughter] And the meaning was, of course, as you probably can guess, “No, don’t drive into the water, go to the other side of the bridge and get off.” [laughter]

VELONA: Right.

HEANEY: But we thought it was pretty funny.

VELONA: Wow. Yeah. That is certainly some interesting wording for that. [laughter]

HEANEY: Interesting wording, yeah. My mom and dad were both involved in the community in various ways, you know, men's fraternal organizations. I think my dad was in one called the Kiwanis. But, you know, Rotary and Sons of Columbus. Things like that were very big at the time. They're still pretty big in some parts of the country.

VELONA: Definitely.

HEANEY: Yeah, Dad was a good athlete and he wanted me to enjoy sports. So, we would have a lot of catches in the front yard and he would always come to see my baseball games or I played football in high school, believe it or not – I weighed 140 pounds. So, it was kind of an excruciating experience for me, but I knew it would mean a lot to Dad. So, I went out for the football team and was pretty terrible at it.

VELONA: Yeah, so was your family particularly religious or did you did you go to church or any religious services?

HEANEY: My dad was pretty religious in a sort of community way. I never talked to him much about his theology, and he wouldn't have called it that. But he became a deacon, I think they call them, you know, like, a member of a board of directors in a Presbyterian church or mainstream church. My mom, I found out later when we would talk about more adult things, was not really a believer. She followed her own father's atheistic views. But my mom's mother was also quite religious, she was a schoolteacher, was well educated. But Dad, yeah, Dad took his religion seriously, particularly in terms of wanting the church or supporting the church in its community projects and outreach.

The '50s was the peak of church growth, one of the peaks, in the United States. So, it was pretty common for all my friends to go to church and different churches, there were about four or five different churches in town. On Sunday, and that meant that unlike today, no coach or recreational team coach would ever schedule practices or games on Sunday morning. Now it happens all the time and churches complain about it, but it's – we're no longer in a peak religious period or society.

VELONA: Right.

HEANEY: But it was a factor in my life, too, because of my dad, whom I greatly admired, and I didn't always want to get up and on Sunday morning and go, but I did, and I was encouraged in that. We had a particularly good pastor who had a nice knack with young adults and teenagers. So that helped. He was considered a cool guy and really built up the youth program in his church.

VELONA: Did you have a lot of friends in your town who you would go to church with, like from school?

HEANEY: I wouldn't say a lot, but several. There was a core group of us that belonged to the youth program in our Presbyterian church and, you know, we did some interesting and some challenging things as a part of that group, after school, as you say. We'd have discussion sessions with a pastor or with other lay leaders. Adults that would have Bible study discussions, that kind of thing. So, it was my perspective as a child, was toward a very churched existence in this nice little rural community in New Jersey, which wasn't as built up as it is now.

And I took it seriously, it interested me, actually, to have these discussions, you know, "is there a God? What is God like?" You know, "How did God create the universe?" Stuff like that. And that continued into about a year of college, I went to Middlebury [College], which you probably know of. And in those days, when we arrived as freshmen and got all the paperwork we were supposed to have. One of the things we were issued, all first years, all freshmen, men and women, was a little card with punch holes printed on it and you had to attend like 50% of the worship services of your denomination and they divided that into Christians, Catholic Christians, Protestant

Christians, and Jews. That probably took in that the universe of our denominational awareness. But every time you went you got your card punched and this was mandatory. You had to go to church half the time. That ended with the latter part of the 60s, just after I got out of college.

VELONA: That seems like a transactional relationship with the worship services at Middlebury.

HEANEY: Yeah.

VELONA: But, if you don't mind, I want to take you back to New Jersey for a little bit more, in terms of your schooling and your time in high school. What was it like being a high schooler in the 1950s, in terms of what you would do with your friends or your academics, perhaps?

HEANEY: Right again, it was very typical of the time I went to a sort of middle size high school. It was a regional high school, so there were kids from other neighboring towns that went every morning to this middle-sized high school. Again, it was a pretty positive experience in those days, there was not a lot of drinking at all. Some kids never drank, including me, until I got to college and that was not untypical. Drugs were not yet – they were about to become an issue and a sad one for many, but when I was in high school, I don't remember ever being offered any kind of drug, even pot. And since I was known as a straight arrow, that would change but in high school I never drank. Just to cut to something else – it's related to that – I am a long term now recovering alcoholic, who had his first drink in college in January of his freshman year, so It's not like there was no booze around. But there were there were no drugs really and alcohol was deferred by most high schoolers till college. Yeah.

VELONA: So, you said that you were perceived, you were seen as a straight edge.

HEANEY: Straight arrow.

VELONA: Straight arrow, yes. Why do you think that was? Were you particularly engaged in your schoolwork? Were you involved in any clubs in school?

HEANEY: Yes to all those questions. I was, not an academic, but I really liked learning stuff. I loved certain subjects like languages, and I would always ask for extra help from language teachers and most of them in those days would just stay after school and tutor me because they could tell I was interested. I didn't work as hard as I probably should have. When I went to interview at Middlebury, my dad went with me and we marched into see to the dean of students. Interviews were mandatory in those days for everybody who was applying. And the Dean of Admissions, after a suitable pleasant talk, he looked at my grade scores and announced, "Well, I can tell you right now, Michael. If you want to come here, you're in. I can do that. But I just want to tell you, you're gonna have to work a lot harder in college because I can tell you're smarter than these grades would indicate." [laughter]

VELONA: Oh my god!

HEANEY: And so I looked at my dad, who was getting, you know, I was looking at the floor and he was [laughter] saying, “See, son? You gotta, keep your grades up." You know, it all worked out fine, but I was not a hardworking student. If a course appealed to me, then I'd put in a little more work, maybe. I liked doing the work, but I wasn't what you'd call a super student. Did you ask about high school or college?

VELONA: High school.

HEANEY: High school. Yeah, languages is one thing I was very interested in high school and I did study them a lot. I had a good friend who was a German American student and there was no German offered. I said, "Would you teach me how to speak German?" He said, "Ah, you know, it's boring. And I said, "Yeah, well, you're a native- German is your first language, but it isn't for me" and he recognized that I really was interested and by the time I graduated from high school, I could carry on a pretty modest discussion with my friend Berndt in German. And that's the kind of thing that I would be drawn to. In fact, that's why I ended up going to Middlebury, because it had a reputation as emphasizing language study.

As far as activities in high school were concerned, I think I mentioned I played sports. I play varsity baseball, varsity football, which – huge mistake. It toughened me up a little bit. We didn't have any soccer team. That's what I really wanted to play, but we didn't have a team. Soccer was just kind of growing as a varsity sport in those days in the 50s. Oh, I became leader of the student council my senior year and that was a big deal. You know, there was a political campaign that all the candidates put on and we had to gather and make a big speech at an entire school assembly. So that was something that interested me and maybe awakened a little bit of an interest in politics and I went a little ways with that, I'll tell you when we get to that in terms of my age. Yeah, that about - I had a good group of peers, really nice guys. Three of whom from my middle-sized high school in the middle of New Jersey, three of them went to Dartmouth.

VELONA: Oh, really.

HEANEY: Which was considered a big coup. It's a lot of guys and – they were all men in those days – from a school our size.

VELONA: Right.

HEANEY: And so, we would visit each other. I was good friends with one in particular and it wasn't that far to go between Middlebury and Dartmouth.

VELONA: That seems like a good transition into your time at Middlebury. So just for the record, what year did you graduate high school?

HEANEY: '60. I graduated high school in '60 and Middlebury in ’64.

VELONA: Okay.

HEANEY. High school was Bernard's High, situated in the town of Bernardsville [NJ], but the locals say "Bernerdsville."

VELONA: And so, by the point of entering your time at Middlebury, how many languages did you speak?

HEANEY: Well, I could get by with very simple conversations in French and German, because of my buddy Berndt, and Spanish. And I took two years of Latin and then there weren't any more languages left.

VELONA: You got through them all.

HEANEY: But I would do, I remember one year, I must have been a junior or senior. I was a senior. And a local college, Fairleigh Dickinson University, which was a few miles away from Bernardsville. They offered high school seniors, like me, who were interested in languages, a freshman level – college freshman level course in Russian. And three of us signed up and it was a guy and a gal and we were all buddies. Every Saturday morning we'd get up early and we would drive to Fairleigh Dickinson and take this Russian course and this same kind of thing goes on now. I love that and we secretly loved the fact that Russian wasn't taught at Bernard's High School, or any high school for that matter. I don't think this was a Cold War era or period.

And then another, there was one of these lifelong learning institutions at the high school, that was run out of the high school, where you get adults to come take a high school course or a college level course. And one of the courses they offered repeatedly was English for Beginners. They had another name for it, but it was it was mostly adults, a lot of immigrants who wanted to improve their English. And I approached the guy who was going to teach it and said, "Could I just help out as an instructor here? I'm very interested in language and maybe that would help me be an asset to your course that you're teaching. And he said, "Sure." So, I did that for a couple of years. And that was fun, because this class had a wide variety of students, a lot of Hispanics, even back then, a couple of French people, and I'm sure there were more, I just don't remember. So that was a principal interest of mine, was languages.

VELONA: And so when you got to Middlebury, did you know right away what you wanted to study, or?

HEANEY: I thought I did. I thought I knew, and I did sign up for a lot of languages and second year, my sophomore year, I opted for a Russian Studies major because of the Cold War. They had a pretty strong head of the Russian department at Middlebury whose textbooks we used, and he was really kind of a creepy guy though, which his little acolytes didn't talk much about.

But I was the first varsity athlete Dr. Fayer had ever had as a major and so I didn't know what to expect from him in that arena and he had no idea what to expect of me because I went out for soccer. And in those days, again, different from today, you could come to college, at least a college like Middlebury and ask a coach if he would teach you to become a soccer player. Because I wasn't gonna play football at the college level. [laughter]

VELONA: Right.

HEANEY: Yeah, I had gained some sense. I really loved soccer and I took to it pretty well and the coach was great. We'd allocate a few hours every week for him to come down one on one and just help me learn to play.

So, I was talking about Dr. Fayer, the Russian guy. I remained a Russian major until the beginning of my senior year and went out for soccer, of course made the team, was elected a co-captain of the team with another guy who was a friend of mine, who became an All American. He was really good. And the first time we had an away game, that year, that season, Dr. Fayer was talking about the next class, which happened to conflict with this away soccer game. And so when he was talking about it. I raised my hand and said "Dr. Fayer, I'm going to be away that day. Can I do the work in advance or whatever." And I didn't know him really that well and he said, "Well, what's the conflict? And I explained. And he said, "You mean you think you're going to get out of coming to class because of sport? And I looked at him and said, "Well, yeah, that's been the way we've done it for the last three years and all the teams do that, all varsity teams." And he said, "Well, no, I don't allow that." I said "Have you ever had a Russian major? And have you ever talked to anybody about this?"

And he said, "No, this is my rule." And so I, in a fit of very immature pushback, I stood up in class, all full of myself because I knew I was right on this one anyway, and I said, "Well, you can't do that. And my parents are paying for the education. That's the rule of the institution, talk to any coach about that, and I can't agree to do it that way. And in fact, I'm going to change majors." [laughter] And I walked out. I know I walked out of the class and all the other students, who were these little acolytes who loved Dr. Fayer, I don't think they'd ever had an athlete. [laughter]

VELONA: Yeah.

HEANEY: -in their classes they all started looking down at their desks and I walked out and walked right to the dean's office because on the way down, I was saying to myself, "You didn't just do what I think you did." [laughter]

And long story short, the Dean was very understanding. And he said, "Well, is there any other bunch of courses you've taken that you can maybe finish on time, if we concentrate on another subject, on another major. I said, "Yeah, we can do that," so I picked anthropology, which was also interesting. And Fayer and I never saw each other

again. He was not happy. But the faculty, of course, backed me and didn't understand how he had missed this part of college life, but he did.

VELONA: Wow, that is a very confident move to stand up and verbally end the major like that.

HEANEY: Well yeah, I had a lot of swagger and I didn't know how colleges actually worked as institutions. It was kind of a, I don’t know.

VELONA: So, you were the co-captain of the soccer team by this point, do you think that gave you a sort of confidence that would maybe allow you to do that? Or you used the word swagger. How do you think that leadership role affected your mindset?

HEANEY: That's a good question. I didn't focus a lot on it at the time, but I, looking back, I got involved with a lot of student organizations, several of which were elected positions. I headed the, for example, excuse me, the Men's Judicial Council, which was like this little mini court that was assigned various evildoers, who had made student mistakes on campus. The one I remember was a guy who had a .22 in his room and he organized his fraternity and they all went out one day and shot, and he set up a little rifle range where they would run around. Shows you how things are different now.

VELONA: Yeah.

HEANEY: They would around and shoot at targets they had planted. And that was our single cop. The college's single, full-time cop whom we nicknamed Bullet Bob. He was actually a nice guy. As you can imagine, though, he said "We can't let you run around, you and your buddies, your brothers, shooting a .22 at the foundation of your house and I'm going to have to write you up." So that that kind of thing would go, or if he got home late or your date got home after curfew. And there was a curfew. in those days that only lasted another couple of years, and then all kinds of things started to happen, but we missed all that. That kind of thing was referred to the Men's Judicial Council and we had to deliberate and decide what will be an appropriate penalty and without appearing to be too big for our britches, which was of course the fear in that kind of situation. I was president of the Inter-Fraternity Council, which, as its name implies, was just another organization available to students who were big on fraternity life.

VELONA: Right.

HEANEY: To resolve policy issues. There was a constant tension involved on campus with women sneaking into fraternities and staying overnight. I'm sure that type of thing has always happened, and the deans of the college announced that if this didn't change, because they couldn't seem to enforce it, if this didn't change the administration was going to take over the management of fraternities and consider abolishing them. And, I mean Dartmouth's gone through similar things. So that was something that the Inter-Fraternity Council would take up and deliberate on and try to negotiate a settlement, which we did. Then we began to police and patrol fraternities ourselves. The

Inter-Fraternity Council would assign reputable men on campus and they would get to go into fraternities [laughter] any time they wanted, surprise visit.
And what we of course did was just say, "Okay, guys. You know the rules. We're not going to do anything, but you got to get the girls out now." [laughter]

VELONA: Right.

HEANEY: So, we managed to walk a tightrope where we were seen as good guys because we never handed out any discipline and we solved the administration's problem. Then the 60s happened and it wasn't a problem anymore. [laughter]

VELONA: Yeah.

HEANEY: Yeah.

VELONA: That's quite the diplomatic achievement for a college student.

HEANEY: I mean the truth was, I was a little bit too big for my britches at that age. Given actually what was a considerable amount of responsibility, this college's attitude was, and I think that were right on this, the students need to learn how to govern their lives, how to govern their communities of students, and learn parliamentary procedure. I mean, not everybody's going to need to know that, but when you get out of college and no matter what you do, really in your life, at some point or points, especially as a graduate from a school like Dartmouth you got to know how to speak to meetings, you got to know how to speak to your fellow citizens, your fellow town residents. And this is good practice for that. Everybody ought to be able to get on his feet and hold forth on an issue of the day. So, it was okay. It taught me a lot about things.

VELONA: Right. What do you think drew you to run for these leadership roles or take on these leadership positions, especially ones of peer leadership?

HEANEY: Yeah. It was something that I liked doing, thought I was okay at it, and I think a big influence on my life at that point was my father. Here's a guy, that I loved him dearly. He had his faults, but he was a very good leader. Leader of men, leader of social groups. He was good looking, articulate, and enjoyed that aspect of life. He went to law school, as I said. He later became a judge in New Jersey. And part of me, I'm sure I wasn't particularly conscious of it at the time, but I wanted to be like him in some respects and certainly in terms of running groups and trying to reach negotiated settlements on hard issues. That was something I really was drawn to because that's the way he operated, and he was well liked in his community.

VELONA: Right. So, with your father as a role model, and did you – maybe this is going back a little bit – but aside from playing war with your friends, did you have any interest in being like your father and serving in the military? Because we're in the early 1960s at this point.

HEANEY: Right and I don't know whether this happened at other campuses, but Middlebury was really inadequate in terms of keeping us posted on things like that, on the Vietnam War, in particular, because even though '60 to '64 was early as far as our American involvement, it was starting to get people's attention. But it wasn't talked about that much. Anyway, to go back to your question, why the military? Again, I idolized my dad's sense of citizenship and duty and volunteering to take what turned out to be a very dangerous job in the military. And although we didn't talk about it, we didn't have father and son talks about "Well, son, and you're gonna sign up?" There was none of that. And I think looking back, he may not have wanted me to – he knew what war was about. And he didn't want me in it.

But I had his example and his combat diary, and my buddies were always fascinated to hear stories about my father and his exploits. So that had something to do with it. Middlebury also was a so-called land grant college, which meant that the federal government gave them property, real estate in Vermont to add to the campus. And in exchange, Middlebury agreed to have an Army ROTC, Reserve Officers Training Corps, program. The first two years of which, freshman and sophomore year all men had to take ROTC as a course.

And then after the first two years they could opt to go on in their junior and senior year and continue with the ROTC program. And you got a little stipend, a little bit of money for doing that. And then when you graduated you were obligated to a two-year period of active duty. If you didn't opt to do that, then you just opted out of ROTC and you did not have to participate anymore in a ROTC program.

And in the early '60s, there was a draft, but there wasn't – not many people were being drafted because we didn't have a huge standing army until Vietnam really got going. And the draft itself became a big issue during the war.

I decided at the time we had to make these decisions which was probably toward the middle of your sophomore year. I thought, "Hey, there's no war going on right now." I knew almost nothing about Vietnam.

VELONA: Right.

HEANEY: Right. And if I knew more, I don't know what I would have made of it. But anyway, I'm not at any particular risk if I sign up for ROTC now, there's not that much going on in the world of a war nature, I would make my dad proud because I did my duty and signed up. I get paid, I wouldn't have to look for a job, I could defer that whole process for another couple of years. So, so why not? And then because of the way I am, and I still wanted to see myself as this gung-ho guy who could take anything the army could throw at me, like boot camp and all that stuff. "I'll show them." So, I signed up. And with a signing up, you had to select a branch that you wanted to be assigned to and almost all the guys at Middlebury were signing up for finance or quartermaster corps or Judge Advocate General, the lawyers corps in the Army, branches that were small, and were particularly on the lookout for well-educated young men.

I chose Infantry [laughter] because I wanted to be one of the cool guys. And so when I went on active duty, finished my infantry officers' training and then with a bunch of my cronies. That's what I get to the most trouble, is when I find a little peer group who thinks like I do and we're going to show -- you're going to change the world. And so, a group of about five of u decided, "Hey, we all know that we didn't learn much in infantry basic school. It was kind of a game and so we better get more than we have by way of training so far. So, we all shook hands on it, we would go to Ranger School, which was a kind of a Special Forces type of thing.

VELONA: Right.

HEANEY: Not like the Seals. It wasn't that grueling, but it was pretty grueling. And then we'll really learn something about as an infantry officer, you wanted to know something about long range patrolling, and hand-to-hand combat and navigating on the ground before, you know, the electronics and GPS is and all that stuff.

VELONA: Right.

HEANEY: So, we all volunteered at the same time, thinking "Maybe they'll take one or two of us." They took all of us, and we went through Ranger School together and then we went through jump school, paratrooper school. And by the end of that we would have been willing to take on, you know, any enemy –

VELONA: Sure.

HEANEY: Under any circumstances. We referred to ourselves, it was a Vietnam phrase and, please don't take this the wrong way, my cuss words, but we were the meanest motherfuckers in the valley. That was the phrase.

What I didn't realize, of course, at that point was a lot of this training – and I think the Army's right on this – a lot of this training is to turn you into more of a soldier than you came out of college as. So, they would make it is hard as they could, as grueling as they could, without actually hurting people physically. But there was a lot of emotional challenges and teasing. And what's the word I want what? What do they do to fraternity.

VELONA: Hazing.

HEANEY: Hazing, yes thank you. A lot of hazing and some of the people who were hazing us were enlisted man, you know, lower ranking men, who were instructors and good ones. But this was their chance to get at these young, know-nothing college kids.

VELONA: Right.

HEANEY: Who think they're so smart and so tough and "we'll show them" and they used that opportunity when they could. It actually probably helped us in the sense that we toughened up a little bit.

VELONA: So, I definitely want to get into all of the training, but I want to bring you back a little bit to the ROTC program.

HEANEY: Yeah.

VELONA: So, first, you mentioned the stipend. Is that something that you only got if you continued after the first two years?

HEANEY: Yes. You didn't get anything the first two years and if you opted to go on with it.

VELONA: Okay.

HEANEY: Yes, you're exactly right.

VELONA: And so, before you even had the chance to opt in for the second two years, what did you think of the program? If you can go back to your first class or your first training with the ROTC program. What did you think of it?

HEANEY: Um, that's a good question. The ROTC program – of course, all the non-ROTC guys would poo-poo the program and say what a waste of time it was. And anyway, it was also required you to take a pro-war position on things. And so, not everybody, but a lot of guys did that. It made us think a little bit about what we were doing. But since there was no war yet in our consciousness, it wasn't a big factor. Some of the instructors, both enlisted instructors and officer instructors, were really good, and really tried to teach us what they thought we would need to know, particularly if you were in a combat branch like infantry. The comment branches were artillery, infantry and armor.

When we started ROTC, the third combat branch was cavalry. And they, the instructors hastened to tell us that doesn't mean you're going to be riding around on horses or carrying loads on the backs of mules, but the cavalry performs that function and today's cavalry just means very highly mobile units that do a lot of scouting and reconnoitering, like the cavalry used to do. But now we will do it with helicopters, because helicopters can go anywhere pretty quickly and pretty safely. It's much more safe to go somewhere in a helicopter than it is to jump out of a plane with a parachute on your back. The airborne divisions were always considered part of the cavalry, like cavalry in that sense.

Some of the instruction, the ROTC instruction did seem silly, unnecessary, and some of the instructors weren't that great, but some of them were really good and well-educated and devoted to the military life. The only time our fellow students saw us in a context where they could identify us as soldiers [was when] we had drill once a week. I think it

was Thursday afternoon, and we would all get our class A, green uniforms on and gather in the athletic fields, and march around for an hour. And that was really seen as silly by many, but again, the idea of getting a bunch of guys with no army training to move in the same direction and then change direction instantly, carrying equipment sometimes for long distances, all that taught us stuff about military life. In the Civil War, for instance, they didn't do what they call dismounted drill: marching around on your feet, not on a horse. And they had no riflery training in the civil war. So many guys knew how to use rifles and did. So many men who entered service during the Civil War were farmers and lived, grew up in small towns, maybe 300 to 500 people. And so, they didn't need the same degree of training and the same kinds of things as a modern young American would have to have.

But still, I had known that going in and once I'd been – my view started to get more comfortable with a military way of life and even honor some of it because it's one of the few professions where everybody takes an oath. And that oath means you will do as ordered to do and if that means your life is put at risk or you're killed, that's what you're swearing to do. And that's the way an army has to operate. That that always meant a lot to me. I wasn't thinking in terms of, "is this a war that's justified and that we ought to fight."

This is an ultimate, an extreme example of doing your duty. Even if you don't agree with the order or the war. And that's noble. And so, guys who were kind of young romantics like me, not everybody went in the service felt this way, but I sure did. And I had always in the background was the example of my father.

VELONA: Right.

HEANEY: Who, besides volunteering and becoming a pilot and having a very difficult and nearly fatal deployment on several occasions. And the context for that being World War II, which was not a good war, no wars are good, but it was a necessary war and most Americans felt that way strongly. So, I was kind of inserting myself into that perspective on life and duty. I always feel that, even despite what happened to me, all the upset and trauma and the crap, I don't know who I would have turned out to be without that experience. I was proud of my guys always, they did what they were asked to do. I did what I was asked to do. And we were all scared, all the time. [laughter]

VELONA: I'm sure, yeah.

HEANEY: [laughter] Yeah, that's the way it is.

VELONA: You brought up the example of your father and you mentioned how you would tell your friends who were curious about your father's experience in the war. Did you bring his combat journals with you to Middlebury?

HEANEY: I don't remember. I may have. He was very open to letting me read it. He didn't particularly want to talk about it a lot. But I think what was going on with him was

he wanted me to have his voice in the things around me that I was being influenced by. And so, he might not want to tell a story about a particularly tough time, but he was okay with me reading about that particularly tough time. Then sometimes I asked him follow up questions, you know. "Oh, please, Dad, tell me more about this." And sometimes he would. And as I say, he was modest, like World War II vets tended to be. He was not used to speaking, except to their vet friends, they would speak to them. But family, civilians, or other people who were not veterans, they didn't do a lot of that. They just didn't.

VELONA: Right. Do you remember what it was like to tell your friends about your father's experiences in combat, or as a pilot? Do you remember a little bit about that – about sort of taking on his voice in that way and sharing that with them?

HEANEY: I don’t remember – well, I do remember one incident and I'll tell you about that. But, I think I probably overdid it a little bit because I was so proud of my dad I wanted everybody to be proud of him. And everybody to know some of the things he had done. One time there was a guy in my class. This was when I was in middle school, I was in seventh or eighth grade. I had brought in the diary with the permission of the teacher for a show and tell session. A student or students were called on each morning, preferably with something that they brought in and could talk to the class about. I did that with the diary and that was great. It turned out my teacher, whatever grade he was, was called – not McNamara, but it was a Scottish name. He was Scottish-American, and he had been a tank commander in World War II, but he never told anybody. He never told the students that. Another modest guy. And after I brought in my dad's diary and talked a little bit about my dad. He said, "You know, I was in the service during World War II in the British Army. Would you like to hear some stories about that?" Because he could tell I had an interest in this. I said, "Oh yeah, that'd be super," so after school I said "Can I invite some friends if they're interested, and they were. He sat down and proceeded to tell us some great stories, some hair-raising, some funny. But this was from the horse's mouth and if it hadn't been for that diary and my references to it, I don't think that would ever have happened.

The same day – this is very – what’s the word? – inappropriate –

VELONA: Okay. [laughter]

HEANEY: I said something inappropriate. There was this guy who was a townie, you know, every high school has its townies. Me and my hot-shot friends looked askance at the townies in our class and their leaders. One of their leaders was really bad, always running around and poking fun at us and threatening to beat us up, which they probably could have done. So he came up to me and he said, "So, that's your dad, huh?. I don't believe any of that. I think he was probably some grease monkey." [laughter]

VELONA: Oh my gosh.

HEANEY: And maybe he really thought that, I don't know. And I couldn't believe he'd said it. And then I didn't know what to do because he was much bigger than I was, so I couldn't take him on. But my friends rallied and said "You want to read the combat diary - Mike's dad's? I'm sure that'd be okay and then you'll see!" So somehow that whole thing got toned down and everybody apologized to everybody, but it's just something I remember.

VELONA: Right.

HEANEY: We worked our way through it.

VELONA: So, the diary and the experience of your father in World War II seems like it was very prominent in your younger years, maybe more than your time at Middlebury.

HEANEY: Right.

VELONA: And so, if we could go back to the ROTC. Sorry, we're kind of jumping around here.

HEANEY: That's all right. No problem.

VELONA: So, you talked about the oath that you took was that – Is there an oath that you need to take when you're in that program when you opt in for the second two years, or were you talking about when you were fully enlisted?

HEANEY: It's an oath that everybody in the military, no matter what rank, what job, takes when they go on active duty.

VELONA: Okay.

HEANEY: And it's a standard oath. You can look it up on Google. And it's one I'm sure you've heard. But it's often a moment when people taking the oath, first of all, they’re proud. They feel a lot of pride in the country, what it's done, people who have gone before us, and in some cases sacrificed themselves. But the other feeling is, and it goes with the first feeling is, "Holy smoke. What have I done now?” I gave my word. I gave my word that I would do what was asked of me, even if I didn't agree with it because that's the only way an army in combat situation can operate.

VELONA: Right.

HEANEY: You can't have people saying, "Well, I got a better idea, Lieutenant. How about this?"

[laughter]

HEANEY: “Well I’ll leave and you do it.”

[laughter]

VELONA: I don't think that would work out too well. So aside from the training that you got in the ROTC program, you went to basic training. Was that after you graduated Middlebury?

HEANEY: The one I was referring to, yes. After I graduated, there's another summer boot camp that ROTC programs have. It's very similar to boot camp that officers take in college – during their college years in the ROTC program. That summer boot camp is designed to be just what it sounds like. All people going through the service, unless they're people like doctors, who get commissioned as officers. And people going through boot camp typically go during the summer between your junior and senior year. Their boot camps are hosted in and run in maybe six or seven Army bases across the country. And they last probably six weeks, similar to the experience a new draftee or volunteer who's come in with an enlisted rank, private and private first class, the lowest ranks in the service, and learn the basics of their branch.

VELONA: Sure.

HEANEY: And so, you have things like qualifying with whatever the standard rifle is at the time. Qualifying on the use of small arms like grenades, pistols, and little mini bazookas that we had in Vietnam.

VELONA: Right.

HEANEY: And got pushed around by other enlisted men who legally outranked us, but when you were in boot camp, you didn't have any rank. You were a cadet, which isn't a real rank of any kind. The enlisted guys took advantage of the opportunity to run us around and make us look silly. And we understood why. They had the right to have their feelings and have their own pride about what they knew and what these new lieutenants didn't know. So, we had that.

VELONA: You did that between your junior and senior year?

HEANEY: Yes, because by that time, you'd opted in or out of ROTC.

VELONA: Right.

HEANEY: And if you opted in, one of the first major programs you attended was this summer boot camp.

VELONA: And where was your boot camp?

HEANEY: My boot camp was at Fort Devens in Massachusetts.

VELONA: Okay.

HEANEY: Yeah, it was a typical, big Army base, infantry base. Yeah, that was a lot of adventures and misadventures.

[laughter]

VELONA: I'm sure.

HEANEY: But it gave you a real taste of Army life. It gave you a taste of Army life as an enlisted man, as a private with no rank, no pull, no nothing. And you had to do what the sergeant said. One of my first things when we got up there was we would help the cooks prepare meals, especially dinner. One of the big meal preparation things was sitting out on the back porch of the mess hall and skinning potatoes. It was a mound of potatoes you never thought you'd get through it. I mean, just so tedious and time consuming.

The first time I did it, the kitchen police, KP duty, it was a result of the big sergeant who was one of our instructors. He ordered the platoon to get outside on the company street and form up in a little formation. He said, "Okay, I need three volunteers for KP tonight. And I'll tell you this, boys, if you volunteer this time, first time out, you'll never have to do it again while you're here at summer camp." So that sounded like a good idea. And so, I raised my hand of course and me and two other guys got picked. There was a group of cadets with us from what was then Norwich University Military Academy. It's not a military academy anymore, but it has a large ROTC program and a lot of guys, and now women, graduated from Norwich and get commissioned as lieutenants. It used to be everybody, and they were all men signed up to go on active duty if you wanted to go to Norwich. Anyway, we had a bunch of Norwich guys in our barracks, a couple of Middlebury guys, and a smattering of other ROTC cadets. I noticed that as soon as I volunteered after the sergeant suggested what it would mean. I looked over and all those Norwich guys are laughing. [laughter]

VELONA: Oh, no.

HEANEY: I said, "uh oh."

VELONA: [laughter]

HEANEY: So, and then I thought, "well, this turned out all right. That was really grueling, but I did my KP volunteer duty and was dog tired at the end, didn't get anything to eat, and so fine, so I’m good, I won't have to do that again." So, a week later, the sergeant comes by, same deal. "Okay, I need three volunteers" and he said, "I don't know actually, I just need two volunteers. Heaney you're one." [laughter] And then two other guys volunteered. I said, "Sergeant, but you promised. You must remember." He said, "Of course I remember. What do you think I was trying to teach you?" I said, "Well, I don't know, you put up with anything?" He said, "Never volunteer."

[laughter]

HEANEY: I said, "Oh, thanks, sir." So, stuff like that would happen, everybody laughs.

[laughter]

VELONA: Right. That's a tough lesson to learn.

HEANEY: Yeah.

VELONA: So that was the summer of 1963, is that right?

HEANEY: Yes, that's right.

VELONA: Okay. When did you do your basic training?

HEANEY: Uh, what I, what I referred to as basic training was after I graduated and before we'd taken the oath and gone on active duty. You received your orders and your branch assignment, infantry in my case, and then the orders would tell you where to go. It worked out to about a year after your graduation and you could be called up anytime within that period. All infantry officers were sent Fort Benning, Georgia. That's where the Infantry Officers Basic School, is what they called it, IOBS. The school lasted about nine weeks, so every officer and these are mostly ROTC officers. The Army has two other sources of junior officers and ROTC is the biggest actually, or it was then, it may not be now. You got sent down to Fort Benning, Georgia and the word that was used to describe IOBC was "basic." “We’re going to basic now.”

VELONA: Right.

HEANEY: And officers didn't go to the same kind of boot camp basic that enlisted men did. But the training of infantry officers at Fort Benning was stepped up a little bit. They assumed, of course – well, they didn’t have to assume – they knew all of these guys are college graduates. They have a range of ability; some went to pretty crappy colleges and didn't benefit that much from that. Others were out of top colleges. I heard a really good speech once by a general who was in the Carter Administration, talking about how vital bright, liberally educated junior officers are to the Army. They're the contact point between officers and enlisted men. There are nine enlisted ranks, from private to sergeant major. There are nine or ten – depending on how you count ‘em – officer ranks, which start with second lieutenant and go up to a five- star general.

This was the interface between the officers and their life and the expectations we put on officers, even very young men, and enlisted men. Once I was going on active duty and then once LBJ, Lyndon Baines Johnson, came on the radio one summer – the summer of 1965 – to announce that we were going to start sending what they called maneuver battalions, combat battalions to Vietnam, because they needed our help.

Then my dad showed a lot more interest in my military career [laughter] and began to give me his views, his sense of how you can make it okay when you go on active duty. Certain things you never want to do, certain things you always want to do. And an awful lot of the things that he counseled me on had to do with how to treat what's called subordinates or inferiors – superiors-inferiors – without the connotation that that word has.

VELONA: Right.

HEANEY: They're just lower ranking people. Always, always, always stand up for your enlisted guys, the ones you're responsible for. Take responsibility for what they do, even if it's not your problem or not your fault that something has gone wrong, you make it your fault and your problem in front of your men. Always, always, always. I learned how important that is – well, we'll get to that later. That's Vietnam stuff.

VELONA: Yeah.

HEANEY: So, there we were. And we went through infantry officers basic then got our first duty assignments. But before that, as I said, I had gone to Ranger school, which was eight months. I'm sorry, it was nine months – it was three, three, and three; three different locations. Then jump school, which was one week.

VELONA: Oh, wow.

HEANEY: All you had to do was jump out of a plane.

[laughter]

VELONA: How many jumps do you get at jump school?

HEANEY: You get five. And I misspoke. It was three weeks long because there was pre-jump week where you learned all about the parachute itself and how to pull the ripcord and do this and don't do that. And then jumping off a low platform into a pit of sand, but the platform was high enough to simulate hitting the ground at the speed at which you would hit the ground – the height of the platform did that. And so you did that, and then the second week was all devoted to practice exiting an airplane, what they called standing in the door. You'd put your hands outside and push against the side to get in a good, stable position. They said, "don't worry, you won't be sucked out and the jump master, who is going to be right there next to you, he's tied into the plane, he will not let you fall out."

VELONA: Right.

HEANEY: And this is part of all the military training. You've got to trust your peers and you've got to have their back if you want them to have yours. But it was jumping out of an airplane that was fixed to the ground, it was a mock-up. The platform was a lot

higher, but you didn't hit the ground. You were on this cable with pulleys on it and you just jumped out of what looked like the door on the side of the plane and then you'd fall. You'd be tied into this cable with pulleys and you'd bounce as the slack in the risers. All these terms that I'm having trouble remembering. You had four risers that attached you to four points on the canopy of the parachute and then you'd go down to the bottom. So that was pretty safe. The third week was five jumps, one on each day of the week, of the workweek. Then you were in for it. You had to go up in these airplanes. It was a C-119 Packet, a transport airplane. You'd have two big doors, one on each side of the fuselage, near the rear of the airplane, and everybody had a – it's a wire, a cable that is attached to your ripcord and when you're stable in the door and the jump master says "Go," you jump out, and the – there's a name for it – the cable that's attached to your parachute unwinds and then the ripcord unwinds and pulls the canopy with you. Then with a POP, it opens, ideally. Then you're free of the cable – static line is the cable – 'cause that stays with the plane. You're told, at the altitude we jumped at, which I think was 3000 feet, which doesn't seem that high off the ground. [laughter] But you are, you're 3000 feet up. If everything fails, your main parachute, your reserve parachute, which you wear on your stomach, if all that fails in the first ten seconds, you will hit the ground, going about a hundred miles an hour. You're not going to survive that. [laughter]

VELONA: No. [laughter]

HEANEY: You'd stop pretty short. The deal is to stand in the door, go, and you look up. Wait, I'm sorry. You don't look up right away. That's a mistake I made my first jump and I'll tell you what happens. But you jump, the static line comes to its end and pulls the parachute out. If nothing happens and if the chute, canopy doesn't deploy, then you look up and confirm that something's wrong. You have what they used to call a "Mae West" in which the parachute twists in the middle. You have these two big, boob-like things going down, but faster than you want to go.

VELONA: Right.

HEANEY: If that's failing or you're going down too fast because of whatever tangle you have, then you are supposed to pull the reserve, which I can go through all the moves.

[laughter]

VELONA: No, that's alright. [laughter]

HEANEY: I know what the moves are. Just the one reserve shoot will slow you down enough to make it a survivable descent, actually an easily survivable descent. The first time I did a jump, I did everything wrong, like most guys do. The jump master doesn't lay a hand on you. We were told "he's going to protect us and take care of us when we jump" and he instead of doing that, he distracts you if you're the next guy to go out. He'd say "Okay, turn around and look outside." And you do that and you get pushed very hard on your shoulder.

VELONA: Oh my gosh.

HEANEY: And out you go. The speed of the drop will pull the main chute open.

VELONA: Right.

HEANEY: You can just panic or close your eyes and cry or whatever. But you're probably going to be just fine. The first jump I made, I got in the door, I was all gung-ho, I put my hands on the side got pushed out and that kind of distracted me. The next thing I was supposed to do is start counting and get down to ten seconds, but I said "No, I'll just look up now to make sure everything's okay." I laid way back and looked up and I could see the canopy. It looked okay and all of a sudden, boom, there was a loud noise and I couldn't see anything. I said, "What the hell happened? Maybe I'm unconscious. [laughter] What do I do now?" It turns out that when I looked up, and they tell you not to look up, my two back risers, when the chute opened, go BOOM up to the canopy and that makes my helmet, which is on with a strap, go BOOM, so I'm totally blind and going down fast, but everything worked the way it was supposed to. So jump school was actually fun. It appealed to a young man's sense of adventure. [laughter]

VELONA: Right. That sounds very exciting and terrifying, a mix of both. When and where did you do your jump school?

HEANEY: That was also at Fort Benning [GA]. Fort Benning is the main jump school that the Army has. There are a couple of others, there's one at Fort Bragg [NC] that the Special Forces use, but yeah. Fort Benning.

VELONA: And that was – just to get the order right, you did the summer boot camp and then you went on active duty and did the basic training?

HEANEY: Right, for officers.

VELONA: For officers, yes. And then you did the Ranger school and then jump school?

HEANEY: Yes.

VELONA: Okay.

HEANEY: Ranger school and then jump school and then first duty assignment after, which could be anywhere..

VELONA: Right. So, for Ranger school, which you said was nine months.

HEANEY: No, nine weeks.

VELONA. Oh, nine weeks. Okay.

HEANEY: Yeah.

VELONA: Does anything stand out in particular? [laughter] Yeah, that would have been – you said that, and I couldn't imagine being in Special Forces training for nine months.

[laughter]

HEANEY: Yeah, right.

VELONA: Does anything stand out in particular about that experience?

HEANEY: Ranger School?

VELONA: Yeah, how did it compare to the other trainings you did?

HEANEY: Yeah, it was the official mission of Ranger school in those days, in 1965, was to make every guy who was soon to become a lieutenant, and a lot of those were infantry types like I was, able to navigate as precisely as possible over the ground. So, "Okay, today you three guys, you're going to take turns, you'll rotate into the platoon leader position, the leadership position, and you will take your platoon – your little patrol group – five miles to get from here to here. We'd be given a map and compass. And really that's all we had for navigation, was a map and a compass. Just to prove to yourselves that no matter what the terrain looks like, no matter how many turns you have to make, if you get lost and many of you will, you can still find your way, you can still recover where you're supposed to be going by doing X, Y, and Z. So that's purpose number one. And the reason for that is because before GPS and other electronic stuff, that's really all you did have to navigate: a map and a compass. You're responsible for the lives of all your guys and they're trusting you, they're spread out in a column behind you. They're trusting you to get them from point A to point B without blundering into a likely ambush site or making too much noise or getting lost and not being able to find yourself. But you had to do all that.

The second purpose really was to accomplish the rest of the mission, which usually is "Okay at point B, where you're going to navigate these five miles to, you will suddenly come upon a cleared area, where you're not in the woods anymore, you're not in the jungle anymore, and you have to attack that house out there, which belongs to an enemy partisan who is helping the enemy soldiers and you want to capture him and if necessary, kill him. But it's better to take somebody prisoner because he'll be scared that you've captured him. And if you start being nice, give him a cigarette, don't abuse him, don't abuse him ever, you'll have a much better chance of getting useful information from him.

That's been studied. It's the way I would probably react if I were all of a sudden captured and completely disoriented and scared. So that's the other main thing and we had a considerable amount of hand-to-hand combat training and map reading to go with the navigation part. You were going to be trained shows to be able to do that in all kinds

of terrain, meaning we had, the first three weeks of training was all at Fort Benning [GA] on the Fort Benning grounds. We would be walking through pretty flat, hilly terrain. That was relatively easy to stay oriented with your compass because it was pretty flat and you could keep up a normal pace, meaning a normal stride. My pace, for instance, is I go on flat ground at a regular stride 100 meters by walking 118 of my strides.

VELONA: Sure, okay.

HEANEY: It may take you 120, it may take you 110. But everybody knows his own stride and that's a way of measuring distance. You'd have people in your patrol who would be assigned the responsibility to keep the count right of the pace. I'd turn around and say, "Okay, radioman, how far we traveled this last leg?" And then I'd have one or two other guys and they'd check their distances to make sure that they were relatively close together. And it's remarkable how precise you can get it.

VELONA: Right.

HEANEY: What was I saying?

VELONA: You were talking about covering different terrains.

HEANEY: Yeah. The second three weeks were the so-called mountain phase. We would go up to what's almost the bottom of the Appalachian Trail area in Georgia, Dahlonega, Georgia. In the mountain phase you learn to navigate and do things like I was describing on very hilly terrain with some pretty steep rock faces in them. So it made it much harder to navigate and to calculate distance. In that phase you were really using your map a lot and if you can spot terrain features on the ground, which you can then find on your map and make sure that "Yeah, this is where we are on the map." That's just as good as doing distances and compass directions. And we learned a little bit about protected rock climbing, how to go up a cliff face and back down again. You'd be tied in because this is training, you'd be what they call it protected climber. Somebody's got you in a harness with a rope placed around your body in such a way that you can stop a guy from falling almost instantly by just tightening up your belay. We learned that in the second three weeks. Then in the third three weeks that was called the jungle phase. Went down to Pensacola, Florida. We were trucked all over the place and put on board a small troop carrier ship, out off Pensacola, Florida. The idea there was we were going to get off the troop ship and onto these little, we'd call them rubber duckies. What do you call those things, Lucia?

MS. HEANEY: Rigid inflatables.

HEANEY: Rigid inflatables. You can see why I use my lovely assistant all the time.

[laughter]

HEANEY: Getting off the troop carrier and down into these rigid inflatables looks a little bit like, we've all seen those movies of Marines in World War II going to attack an island that's occupied by the Japanese and they crawl down the side of the ship. That's probably the scariest part. And they jump into the thing, so that's what we had, except these were not motorized craft, we had to paddle them to shore, get out, and then go to point C that was considerably inland over absolutely flat, marshy territory, which looked like a tropical zone, or it looked like a jungle. That was okay because we always liked areas that were flat because then you could go by compass. However, taking a step in that kind of terrain is much different than taking a step on hard terrain where your stride is very regular. After we got okay with that, then we would do night movements in this kind of terrain. With a thick canopy, it would always be black when you got down to the ground. A compass had a little phosphorus coating on the North arrow, so you could tell which way was North, anyway.

The most fun I ever had on one of those night movements, and we didn't quite believe it was happening at the time, but the guy who was on point at the head of the column, there probably were ten of us trying to march along. We all had to grab hold of the pack strap of the guy in front of us, so we wouldn't get separated. You didn't want to get separated in that space. In normal life you'd holler for help, but you're not supposed to do that when you're out on a sensitive military operation. So, we're about halfway along our trail for the evening, our assigned path, and the word comes back in whispers from one guy to the next, "Guy on point thinks he just walked over an alligator."

[laughter]

VELONA: Oh my gosh.

[laughter]

HEANEY: And that's the word that's passed back. I still, to this day, think it was the instructor who was with us who sent that word out. Now, OK, you've got my attention. We all kept going and we all walked over what looked like a big log and we hoped it was, but I'll never be sure. [laughter]

VELONA: [laughter] Yeah, right.

HEANEY: Nobody got eaten, fortunately. But that was the kind of thing we did in the jungle school and then we had graduation ceremonies. They consisted of, we were still in Pensacola, you will find an edible animal. Mammal or bird, you could eat a crocodile. Everybody has to make a little Ranger supper out of whatever's out there and then you get your Ranger tabs and you've graduated.

Training was a lot of surprises and a lot of humor, but it's also very apt for what we would be doing in Vietnam and the kind of terrain we'd be crossing through. And the Army, as a policy matter, hadn't really gotten as far forward as they should have been. They were still – Ranger School – up right until the time we got there, was based on

World War II standard, large unit exercises. Almost nothing to do with what we would be actually doing in Vietnam. The way the Army would use this or the company commander who was in charge of four platoons, including mine, he couldn't navigate. He just wasn't any good at it. And I was the only officer in the company that had a Ranger tab, so he fixed on that and said, "Okay, Heaney, you'll be doing most of the navigating as long as I'm in command over here." I was thinking of myself [laughter] and not wanting to do all the navigating because that would put me toward the head of the column on point.

VELONA: Right.

HEANEY: And so, I came up with what I thought was a brilliant excuse. I said, "Sir, that's not fair to my men. We got four platoons, they should each rotate and take a day's worth of movement on point." I could see him thinking "Oh, that sounds right. But I'll think about it." [laughter] So up we went, but my guys actually liked it, or were proud of it, because we were the platoon that always knew where we were. And you really want to know where you were when there's artillery zipping around.

VELONA: Right.

HEANEY: But they didn't like the company commander much because they knew where the order had come from.

VELONA: If you could, tell me a little bit about your deployment after you finished your training. How and when did you find out where you were going and your unit assignment? Did you–

HEANEY: Yeah, okay, good question. Right after Fort Benning, Ranger school, and all that stuff was finished, my first duty assignment was Fort Dix, New Jersey. I and a couple of other lieutenants, junior officers, were the officer cadre leadership in a basic training regiment. We were dealing with raw guys who just a few hours before had gotten off the bus. After taking a trip from wherever that marshaling point was to Fort Dix [NJ] and sleepy and probably nervous. Anyway, we and the sergeants, who actually did most of the training in basic training took them and started teaching them all the basic stuff. "This is a rank insignia, it means the guy's a first lieutenant. What's a higher rank, first lieutenant or second lieutenant?" "Here's how you salute. And here's how you say 'Yes, sir. No, sir.' And here's what you never do. And here's what you always do. For instance, you always salute a superior officer. You do not have to salute a Sergeant, an enlisted man." All that stuff. How to wear a uniform, how to put on a uniform and dress it so it looks organized. It's ridiculous, the specificity that military people have. But having to learn these pain-in-the-butt things made you pay attention to details because if you didn't do it right, you got demerits, and then your platoon would get demerits.

So that kind of thing. Anyway, we were doing that, and I lasted about five months, four months, in that basic training for brigade. The nice part was I got to go see my parents

every weekend because they were only about, two hours, an hour and a half from for Fort Dix. I lived off base with three other lieutenants who had similar roles as me. One of the lieutenants, who was kind of a wild character, said, "I know personally, the major in the Pentagon who makes all junior officer assignments in the infantry." Or in the military, I'll get it. The Army. All of us had too much to drink that night, it was the end of the week on Friday night. And we said, "That's bullshit, There is no such person that makes all the decisions." So, we shook hands and said "Okay, Monday, we're going to all get together and we're going to call the Pentagon and we're each going to volunteer to go. We don't know where we're going in country, what unit we're going to be assigned to. We didn't know anything really about how things are going. This is in latter part of '65. Now we had double-dog dared each other to do this, and not run away. [laughter]

Monday, the guy who supposedly knew the name of this major, said "Okay, you're going to be surprised." And I said, "Yeah, well, you're going to be surprised too. If it's true what you said, you've got to do what we all swore we'd do." Long story short, he was absolutely right. He got on the phone, there was a major who did all those things and one at a time, he said "There's four of you, right? Four second lieutenants?" One at a time we went down the row with the phone and he asked us each a little bit about ourselves and "Are you sure you want to do this?" Of course, we all said yes. We still didn't believe him. But in a couple of weeks, the orders came. We were assigned to your port of call, the port where you're supposed to report next, or base, usually on the way to ultimately where you're going. "You're going to Vietnam; you'll get the orders. And be ready and get your affairs in order." [laughter]

VELONA: Oof.

HEANEY: "Oh, shit. Now we've done it."

VELONA: Yeah!

[laughter]

HEANEY: Our orders started to trickle in and over we went. I only saw one of those other three guys once in the rest of my Army career, in Vietnam I saw him. We kind of melted into the cogs of the machine. I was ordered to go to San Francisco [CA] and get on a jet, a Boeing 707 back in those days. The Army was sending so many men over so quickly that they couldn't accommodate all the Americans, all the GIs on airplanes that the Air Force had. But they didn't have enough space, so we found ourselves on our way to Vietnam. We landed at Guam to refuel. The only thing I remember about Guam is we were allowed to get off the plane and walk around. It was a seagull guano resource place, where seagull guano was. After a while you got used to it, but until you got used to it was almost suffocating, it smelled so bad.

Then we flew to Saigon and reported to what was in Army slang called the "Repo Depot," which was the replacement depot, or the office where you got your next assignment. And I remember the first day, I marched in, walked in and the place was full

of enlisted men, no other officers, no accommodations. And this really smart-ass sergeant who didn't say hello or greet me, or "welcome to Vietnam," or anything. "Let me see your orders, Lieutenant." And so I showed him the orders and he really was an unpleasant guy. He led with, "So, I see here, you're going to replace Lieutenant King." I remember his name was Felix King. "But you'll never to see Lieutenant King" – I'm trying to remember. Felix King. Felix King – "'cause he's dead. And you're going to replace him, so how do you feel about that?" [laughter]

HEANEY: He was so full of himself. I'd like to meet him again someday in life. He was in the wrong job; he didn't have the social skills.

[laughter]

HEANEY: I ended up sleeping on a mattress on the concrete floor. It looked like one of those gymnastic pads they put on the floor to do somersaults and stuff. He gave me my next set of orders and said "You're going to the First Cav. That would be the First Air Cavalry Division. It's the one with a shoulder patch that looks like a shield. It's got a black stripe across a horse's head. It was called a cavalry unit because we had two or three times as many helicopters in the First Cavalry Division than any other Army divisions. This division had trained for months in the United States on what they called air mobility, how to go anywhere. Night, daytime, rain, overloaded in Vietnam. Those Huey pilots, most of them flew Hueys, helicopters, really earned their keep. They would go anywhere they were told to go and I'm sure a lot of them didn't want to go where they had been ordered to go, but there'd be some guys that needed to get to a hospital, or he was going to die. Or somebody that who was wounded and had to be taken off. That's how we landed in An Khe, Vietnam in the – Middle highlands?

VELONA: Is it the Central Highlands?

HEANEY: Yes, thank you.

VElONA: Okay. Could you spell An Khe?

HEANEY: Yes, two words. All Vietnamese is spoken in one syllable words. An Khe is A-N and the second word is K-H-E. That was a relatively small rural hamlet. It was a little bigger than that, but not much. It was a district headquarters for a Vietnamese Army unit that was moved in a little ahead of us. It had been a French compound and airfield during the French war. I flew up to An Khe, and got out, got a jeep ride inside the division perimeter, which was huge, several miles around the perimeter. And I was told to report to the headquarters of the First Brigade because that was an Airborne Brigade and everybody in it had to volunteer for it. Again, that term never set too well with me, volunteering for something. But I was airborne so after I got to headquarters, they said, "Okay, you're going to the First Brigade. We have three brigades among the 16,000 men we have here and about 100 nurses. I was given directions as to how to find the headquarters of the First Brigade and I walked over there. And it took me a while. I was introduced to the brigade commander, a full colonel. That's just one step below general

status. And he was a great guy, a caricature of a straight-shooting, stiff-backed, competent Army senior officer.

VELONA: Okay.

HEANEY: Once you've been in the Army for a while, you get to pick up these things. Who you can likely trust, who sounds the right way, who says the right things, who could be your father.

Because there's an age difference going on there between a full Colonel and a Second Lieutenant. We had a nice chat, not very long, but he welcomed me, he pointed out things in the division perimeter. We were up on a low rise and we could see the whole thing. He said finally said, "Ready, Lieutenant, to get a platoon, an infantry platoon?" I didn't say this, but I was thinking to myself, "Do I have a choice in this?" [laughter] “If I want to go pick up my platoon!” I said, "Oh, sir, I'm ready to go, to do a good job, I think I can do it, I told him a little bit about my dad's World War II experience. He said, "You probably heard by now, but the guy I have in mind for you to replace, Lt. King, he's dead. He was killed in the Ia Drang Valley," which was a big fight that occurred a couple of months before I got there. It was a big, sort of conventional warfare fight on the Cambodian border. Felix King was dead, and they needed a Lieutenant.

The platoon sergeant took over the platoon until they could get a junior officer. I'm sure a lot of the GI's thought it was fine, "why don't you just continue with the platoon sergeant, he knows what he's doing." [laughter] And I sort of made myself say, "Oh yes, Sir, I'm ready to go," having no idea what I was going to be up against. I was much more concerned with "would my guys like me?" Would they figure out I'm a quick learner? I don't know as much as any of you. You've been over here two or three months already, but I can learn quick and I'll listen. I said that mainly to my platoon sergeant, Sam Hunt, who died a couple of years back. One of the smartest guys I've ever met. Totally uneducated, he grew up in inner-city Detroit [MI]. He was already married, was probably about 30 or 35. Black guy with a great sense of humor. He weighed a little bit too much, which I used to kid him about once we got to know each other. The first thing I did, because I was looking at him, he was checking me out, I was checking him out. I remembered what my dad said, "Tell your guys you'll listen to what they have to say. If there's any flak that your platoon has to take because they made a mistake, somebody got injured who shouldn't have been, blah, blah, blah.” This colonel, not the First Colonel, but the Second Colonel which was the battalion commander who commanded all our infantry companies, "He's kind of a quirky guy," Sergeant Hunt told me. I said, "Sergeant Hunt, you will never have to deal with him again. I will take care of all the shit that goes on between company and our platoon and the battalion. I will be responsible for everything we do. He knew and I knew that that was literally not possible for anybody to do, but that was gonna be my – that should be a junior officer's basic orientation. You answer to the man because these guys are your enlisted men. They're not well educated. A lot of them are under appreciated, underestimated, and they will support you if you do something like that. So, he gave me a big smile and said, "That was the right answer, Lieutenant." [laughter] And we were friends from that day on. We

got very close and he really saved our butts, the whole platoon, a couple of times just because of his experience and his innate intelligence. No enlisted men get the appreciation and the admiration that they deserve, they just don't. That's their lot in life. I never heard any of my guys complain.

VELONA: Yeah. It sounds like you expressing that to them really earned their trust and respect. Do you think – you mentioned that your father had given you that advice when it looked like you were definitely going to be deployed overseas. Do you think that it was something that was very uncommon for lieutenants to do?

HEANEY: We were all different people and had different military backgrounds, different educational backgrounds and some of them were terrific junior officers. Certainly, some of them did better jobs than I did. I was pretty inexperienced. This was Sergeant Hunt, I was glad we had that discussion, but this was just a start. They wanted to see, "Okay, that's the right thing to say, but will he do, when the shit hits the fan?" and nobody knows that until the shit hits the fan.

It’s a good question you ask. I think probably guys my age, young lieutenants who had veteran fathers or close family members and that would have put them in World War II, most likely, they probably did get some advice about how to comport yourself. Keep in mind, you don't know squat and you'll learn fast, but don't go in like you know everything, or know anything because you don't.

VELONA: Just to just to situate our discussion, do you remember the day that you got to Vietnam, the specific date?

HEANEY: I have it at home. It was about December 27th or 28th, right after Christmas. I actually got to the First Cav headquarters on Christmas Day, the 25th.

VELONA: Okay.

HEANEY: It was a couple days I spent in Saigon waiting get shipped up to An Khe. So, it was two or three days after Christmas that I arrived there. When I got to my company area and the company was out on a short patrol in another province and were about to come back to the First Cav base camp, but my platoon wasn't there, which just kind of added to the tension. I sat around trying to get settled and talking to another lieutenant, who did not go on the company's mission. He was the company executive officer, the second in command of the company. The protocol in those days was that the executive officer doesn't go out, as second in command, on most missions because he's too valuable. If the captain, company captain gets killed, we want somebody we can immediately plug in to that position, who's got some experience from his earlier time. I found him and I spent a couple days with him, and he filled me in as best he could, he was a nice guy.

VELONA: Okay. So, you were in, you said the first Brigade of the First Cavalry Division?

HEANEY: Yes.

VELONA: Could you just give the full breakdown of your assignment?

HEANEY: Sure. from top to bottom, it was the First Cavalry Division, led by a brigadier general, I want to say, a two-star. I'm not sure that's right, but I'm sure he's a two-star general. The next below that was three brigades, including the First Brigade – First, Second, Third – First Brigade, an airborne brigade, led by a full colonel. Below brigade level you had three infantry battalions of about 400 or 500 each, led by this quirky lieutenant colonel, who would act out his quirkiness as we went on. [laughter] They named all battalions in the First Cav after units that were in the cavalry in the Indian Wars in the Northeast and on the plains in the 1800s. And ironically, some of those battalions were wiped out or nearly wiped out in Custer's Last Stand. I never could figure out why would you name a brigade [laughter] after a real brigade that got annihilated and was involved with Crazy Horse, which became the name of one of our operations, Operation Crazy Horse? Does anybody see the irony going on here? [laughter] Anyway, our battalion was Second/Eighth, meaning second regiment of the 8th Brigade. Then, below battalion level was company level, led by a captain with three infantry platoons. I was the third platoon in Company B of the Second of the 8th of the First Brigade. I can write that all down and send it to you, if you want. It was called a triad system, I think at one point.

Everything seemed to be in threes with an extra whatever of similar strength, but they were a weapons or artillery platoon, so when we went into the field as an infantry platoon they would sometimes go as a fourth infantry platoon, sometimes go as a real weapons platoon, where they would have heavy machine guns, not like light machine guns which we had. They would have a recoilless rifle, which was a next-generation bazooka and mortars. They had three 80mm mortars.

VELONA: Okay.

HEANEY: A pretty well-armed, pretty well-supplied unit, a small-unit.

VELONA: Mm hmm. And how many men were in the third platoon?

[At this point, Mr. Heaney was disconnected from the Zoom call because the battery on his computer ran out. He reconnected a few minutes later.]

HEANEY: Sorry, David, I ran out of juice, which is my fault.

VELONA: Oh, that's quite all right. I figured it was a battery issue or maybe I offended you somehow.

[laughter]

HEANEY: No, no, this is good. So what had you asked me?

VELONA: I had asked about the number of men in the third platoon you were in command of.

HEANEY: Right, so the platoon had 45, or about four squads of eleven guys. Three squads were infantry squads and one was a weapons squad, with smaller weapons: a standard machine gun, a few light anti-tank weapons, which were a throwaway bazooka which expands and then you fired it. It was very accurate, actually.

Above – you wanted to know, oh, how many guys. So in the company, the weapons platoon, the company would have about 160 some, I think was a standard strength. And then the battalion would be a little less than four times the company's strength because the platoon – I mean the battalion had three infantry companies and probably an attached artillery or battery we hauled around by a Huey, slung underneath.

VELONA: Oh, wow, okay.

HEANEY: Then at the top, you just kind of keep multiplying by four and then the three brigades had different strengths and a different set of supplies. The division, as well as I can remember, was about 16,000. A lot of them were pilots, co-pilots, and air crew and a number of mechanics to maintain all those – they're complicated machines that had to be constantly maintained.

VELONA: Right. So, what was your particular unit's mission and role that you played in the An Khe Province in the Central Highlands?

HEANEY: Well, I wish I knew.

[laughter]

HEANEY: That's the question I've been asking for a long time. At first when I first got over there, my first operation, kind of into the boonies, where one of our recon people or teams spotted what he thought were enemy soldiers along the Cambodian-Vietnamese border. And we got called out. We were the ready company, or it might have been just platoon, I don't actually remember.

We were the unit that was tasked to remain with all your gear, all your weapons, all your ammunition, and ready to run to and get on a helicopter as quickly as you can and go to the site where this observation of enemy soldiers had been. And get off the helicopters and start moving out and see if we can make contact. Looking at it from my standpoint as a junior lieutenant, there wasn't any big thinking going on in me at that point. We would later do some of that, but on this first mission, I really knew nothing and didn't have no idea what it was going to be like. I jumped off the helicopter and my faithful platoon sergeant, Sergeant Hunt said, "Sir, you've got to keep down more. You're almost standing up straight wandering around here. That's how Lieutenant, uh, Felix." That was his first name.

VELONA: King?

HEANEY: King. Yeah. Thank you. “That's how Lieutenant king got killed. Literally. He just sat up in a trench to see if he could spot enemy soldiers. This was a few months earlier, and he got shot twice through the chest right away. Boom. Boom. Done. Hunt wasn't trying to impress me, Hunt was trying to keep me alive. And I recognize that.

This isn't like you see on TV, like we played as a kid. And of course, I never forgot that lesson. If you hear a shot or if you have some other reason to think that there's enemy around, you stay low. It's uncomfortable, you can't see where you're going, but that'll give you a little better chance of surviving. So on that first operation we just scouted around, hoping to find some enemy. Another thing I was told us was the enemy you outgun and outman most of the enemy units we'll be coming up against, so don't be afraid to advance. If you hesitate, they're gonna run for it once they see the odds. They didn't want to get killed either.

VELONA: Right.

HEANEY: So, they'd often just take off. To the extent that I did think about it or thoughts crossed my mind, it appeared to me that our operation was just to find and kill enemy soldiers. Or capture, preferably actually capture. And let me say something at this point is that popped into my head when I said killed. The company I was with never, ever mistreated an enemy soldier or guerrilla or civilian. I mean, they weren't always sweetly treated, but nothing that physically would hurt them.

VELONA: Right.

HEANEY: In fact, if we captured a wounded guy or a guy – and this sometimes happened – who was so frightened and shaking so hard, he couldn't do anything. A GI would sometimes put a blanket around his shoulders and or give him a cigarette. All the stuff you see in Hollywood on how we treat enemy soldiers, that was true in the unit I was in when I was in. The atrocities that are often spoken about, and some of them are not exaggerated, also happened and tended to happen as the war got longer, as GI's got more resistant to the war, didn't want to be drafted, didn't want to be killed in a war that to them had become really stupid or pointless. "What are we doing over here?" That kind of thing.

So, I'm not saying there were no atrocities. There were. But I was surprised – pleasantly surprised – at how my men followed orders. I could tell there were a couple that were a little... questionable. One was an ex-cop, as a matter of fact. We captured a guy once, maybe about halfway through my time over there, and his name was Parish. He had bad breath. I remember that about him. He ran up to me when we captured this guy and said, "Don't you worry, Sir. I'll take care of him. I'll watch him. You let me watch him, I know how to do this." I said, "Sergeant Parish, I don't want that man to be hurt in any way." And he sighed and grumbled like, "What kind of a pussy are you?" He didn't say

that, that would be a court martial offense [laughter]. Most of my men, even if they didn't agree with that order. They did not torture people or go out of their way to scare them or whatnot. There is a practical, positive reason to treat and help captives. They're much more likely to help you and see you as somebody who may care about him if he doesn't cause a stink. Parish wandered off. I did let him take the man because I didn't want to undermine his confidence in himself or form an opinion about what my low opinion of him.

VELONA: Right.

HEANEY: That wouldn't be good. I guess my point is it's possible to do that. And that's one of the things that junior officers, senior NCO's [Non-Commissioned Officers], senior enlisted men, are most responsible for handling. You have the authority you have the power. You know what the law is. And don't get messed up with any atrocities.

VELONA: Right.

HEANEY: Most of the time that worked, not always.

VELONA: So that that concerns the treatment of enemy soldiers and prisoners. Did you have much interaction with the civilian population in the Central Highlands?

HEANEY: It depended on the operation and the mission, but if we'd been assigned, say to patrol a relatively built up area, built up for Vietnam. Here they would be considered probably hamlets and farm villages. What was I going to say?

MS. HEANEY: Civilian interactions.

HEANEY: Civilians, thank you. We did not. And we got all kinds of different reactions. Some of them I put down on my diary because they really had an influence on me. For instance, we were walking through one of these hamlets one day on an operation. Our intelligence told us that there's a high likelihood of enemy activity, enemy soldiers, coming from this village. When you go through the village, they'll have skedaddled and there'll be up on the high ground on a ridge up on a hilltop hiding. The locals will not tell you anything about them and it'll get very uncomfortable when you point out, "You've got old guys here, you got a lot of women, babies, but no young men of military age. Why is that?" And they make up some excuses, why it was. None of which made any sense. They'd be frightened that we were going to take this out on them. You probably have seen *Platoon*, the movie?

VELONA: Yes.

HEANEY: There's one scene in there where they walk through a village and get in an argument and the bad American sergeant wants to terrorize information from a guy’s, a Vietnamese wife. He ends up shooting her in front of everybody like it's nothing. And then there's a big fight between the Americans.

I never saw anything like that. A couple of times, what might have been a potential problem, one GI getting on somebody's case, I found if we nipped it in the bud, the abuse would stop. My sergeant was great on this. He was a career Army sergeant. And as I said he was quite bright, and he knew what the rules were. He was a big guy, he was intimidating, and he wouldn't have any of that either. That's not what we do. I think it's because he felt this was an honorable profession, as far as he was concerned, he had done well in it. The Army had done well by him.

VELONA: Right.

HEANEY: He was not going to break the rules.

VELONA: That was Sergeant Hunt?

HEANEY: Sergeant Hunt, yeah.

VELONA: Okay, yes. If you wouldn't mind, would you tell me a little bit about the ambush that you experienced and maybe leading up to that day?

HEANEY: Yeah. A little context that will help you understand what happened better. When this ambush happened, I'd been over there almost half a year, five and half months or something like that. We had a brand-new company commander, who, at first blush, we felt was probably a pretty good guy. He had come up through the ranks. He was an enlisted man in the Korean War. He had one of his fingers shot off. He loved to show us [laughter], "What am I missing?" That kind of GI humor. This was a training cruise, or what do they call it when a ship goes out for the first time?

MS. HEANEY: Shakedown.

HEANEY: Shakedown cruise, yes, thank you. Shakedown cruise. So, where he could get a feel for this company he was taking over. It's a huge responsibility. 150 guys, plus or minus, and the company got a chance to take – look at him and watch him actually out in the field on an ambush – not on an ambush, we didn’t expect that at all, but in the field. The intelligence had said this is not a tough mission, we have no reports of enemy soldiers in the vicinity, you're just going to walk up to the top of this ridge overlooking a valley where there had been some mortar fire coming from the last few days. Nobody should be too uptight. We don't expect any contact at all. When anybody said that kind of thing to me, "Don't worry about any contact," [laughter] that's exactly when I did start to worry about it. It just seemed like bad luck, jinx to say stuff like that.
A lot of the men in my platoon had also been over there as long as I had and picked up what we could during that five plus months.

Me and another platoon leader, another lieutenant early in the day, this is March – sorry, May 16, 1966, we went out on a helicopter recon early in the day and kind of traced over with a helicopter over the route we expected to take going up to the top of

the ridge. The stated mission was we were going to discourage any small unit that's up there with a bunch of mortars harassing the village in the valley below and to kill, capture, or destroy any enemy soldiers that we could locate. That seemed doable not posing too much of a risk, except it's a war zone, so anything can happen at any time. It was one of those mornings, where I got assigned, my platoon got assigned to lead the company column, so we're walking up there. I was low on men that day with my own 16 or 17 guys on the point. The other three platoons in our column were behind us, spread out little greater numbers, little better strength. I'm just trying to think if there's anything important that I left out. We felt pretty strong. In fact, my platoon, third platoon B Company, on that day had not lost any of my platoon's men in that five and a half months. To psych ourselves up, we would get into this bravado attitude. "We're the meanest, you know, in the valley, we look so sweet. We got nobody killed in the last five and a half months, which no one should say in a combat zone.

VELONA: Had you had any contact with the enemy and been in combat with your unit?

HEANEY: Yes, we had been in several firefights and contact with the enemy, but we always lucked out and always seemed to come up against units that were not as well manned as us and certainly not as well supported. We had artillery support, we had heavy mortars down in the valley below. We just began to think of ourselves as a little different, as a little untouchable and "you better not mess with us." I had asked Sergeant Hunt in another village we were in, I noticed they were selling little green scarves and I said, "What do you think, Sergeant? That's about the color of our camouflage colors that we use. They're cheap. Why don't we buy a scarf for every guy in our platoon, just to give us a sense of uniqueness and good luck and all that stuff. He said, "Yeah, it's a great idea." So we did that. And then the higher ups never wanted to see that kind of thing. They never wanted to see standard uniform clothing and stuff. So we would wait till we got out of the helicopters and the higher ups wouldn't follow us at that point. [laughter] They let us go ahead alone and that's when we put on our scarves and the guys kind of liked that, most of them. But that's kind of how we were feeling about ourselves and again, five and a half months of pretty straight activity in the field. We had a couple of weeks where we came back and stood down and rested up got drunk. We really did feel we all must be as competent as experienced as anybody else out here because things are going well for us and we've been here a long time, in terms of combat it's a long time. I think most of the men felt that way too. They felt, okay this is a good platoon to be in, even though we did more than our share of being on point.

That afternoon we got our final thoughts together and the division started to transport us from An Khe in the base camp in a bunch of Hueys over close to where this ridge was, where we thought there had been a mortar set up. I was in the first platoon and the landing zone was small, it was only big enough for one Huey at a time to come down, land and disembark the guys that were in it. They probably carried about six or seven guys per helicopter and that's a lot. It's a lot of weight, with all your equipment and stuff. And so that slowed down the pace at which we could land troops. It took a good part of the early afternoon to do that.

And in the meantime, I got one of my trusted sergeants, who was a squad leader in my platoon. I told him to take his squad and start up the hill. We immediately found a muddy, recently used trail with communications wire strung out along the trail and disappearing up into the woods on the ridge. My lead sergeant and I had a consult, which went something like, "So, Lieutenant, you see that?" "Yeah. Commo wire." And the sergeant says, "Yeah. Commo wire. Fuck."

[laughter]

HEANEY: We knew what it meant, and we didn't have to say much. And so, I said, "Okay, start up and I'll be right behind you." And we walk quite a bit to the top of the ridge and then we got over the point on the top of the ridge, which is a little rise and started coming down the other side into a little dip.

My lead man, Sergeant Picardo Mays, his name was, a Black guy from Los Angeles. He was a little, I sometimes wondered at the time, I mean, we didn't ever talk about this, if he was gay, he might have been. He had the right mannerisms; he was very fastidious. He always wanted to make his uniform look good, even out in the middle of the woods. [laughter] He was a smart guy, he wrote a lot of letters home and got a lot of letters. He's on the very front point of the company column with 100 and some guys spread out behind him. And so, there was quite a distance between him and the very last man in the company, probably a quarter mile at least. He got down in the dip, or he was walking along the dip, and all of a sudden, and I didn't actually see him pull the trigger, but he was close enough so that I could see him, I just didn't happen to be looking at him. And he put his M-16 up to his shoulder and he shot off two rounds. Boom, boom. And that got everybody's attention. That wasn't supposed to happen. And he turned around and looked at me and said, "Lieutenant! VC on the trail." Actually, it wasn't a VC, it wasn't a Victory Charlie, an insurgent, it was a regular North Vietnamese soldier with all the standard equipment they used. And the next thing I see is, here is a round coming toward us and it went through his chest front to back. Spray of red, you know, blown out into the air and he's down and he's dead. And we all know it. You know, you could see enough of him to know he was dead.

And so, I was kind of stunned and didn't react immediately. It's hard to figure out, what's the right thing to do here? We had what we called flank security out on either side of our column, so if these enemy soldiers, or whoever was shooting at us, had tried to assault us from the side, they'd run into those guys. And we'd have some warning and we'd know where at least a few of them were. So is it the right time to order an attack, you know, an assault, which seemed a little counterintuitive because we didn't know how many of them there were and we didn't know exactly where they were. But we started pretty quickly to take very heavy fire and a couple of guys were yelling about soldiers they were seeing. They're moaning, a couple of them. I figured, "Okay, they're either real scared or they're hurt or injured." I ordered everybody to get down, you know, face the – make a little perimeter, face the outside toward where we think the firing's coming from. And that's all I said. I gave them some words of encouragement, because I don't honestly, remember that. But I thought I did. I didn't remember what words I used, but

another guy told me years later, exactly the same thing, some of the words I used. "Let's – come on, we gotta save ourselves. We're all alone out here. We're all going to help out and get through this." Stuff like that, you know, stuff that's in Hollywood movies. I didn't know what else to say.

And get down and, you know, just take anybody under fire that you see out there ahead of us. I got down on the ground, you know, prone position and I yelled to my radio man, a guy named Terry Carpenter, whose family Lucia [HEANEY] and I saw last year in Florida, the first time I'd ever seen the family because he didn't make it. They were so thankful to be able to hear from somebody who was there the time he was killed.

MS. HEANEY: Excuse me, Michael, I'm going to the meeting. I'll be back late, around 8:30.

HEANEY: About 8:30? Okay. Thanks for helping out with the IT stuff, you're hired.

[laughter]

HEANEY: So, Terry had been my radio man for as long as I had been over there. And we were pretty close. The radio man always tries to stay close to the unit leader when you're out in the field because he needs to be able to give the lieutenant, in this case, the radio - the handset, so he can communicate with higher ups. And so, he started to move toward me. He was on the ground and all of a sudden, he was shot in the head. And he couldn't have been more than three or four feet away from me. And again, "Oh shit, Terry's dead, but, Michael, you don't have time to deal with that right now and you keep going." And so, I think it was about that point. Some of the timing on this stuff is a little jumbled, but it all happened in a very short time. The company commander, who I couldn't see him, but I knew he was back in the column somewhere. He told me years later, it was the firefight, the noise was deafening, so he figured we'd run into something bad. And he said, "Okay," we all had code names. Mine was Right Tackle Three Six. That's my email address. [laughter]

VELONA: Ah, okay.

HEANEY: That's what it is. People say, "You play football? You don't look big enough." [laughter] I say, "No." That would explain what it was. Anyway, the captain called me and said, "So Right Tackle Three Six, I know you're having a hard time. Bring everybody back and form a more organized perimeter maybe 50 feet or so away from where the firefight's going on, and then we'll figure out what to do." So, I said, "Okay." That's when I gave them a little pep talk and said, "Okay, get up. This is what we're going to do." And I realized, all of the sudden, nobody was getting up. And nobody in front of us, to the extent that I could even see them, was doing anything. They weren't returning fire, they weren't running to a new position, a different position. They were all just lying where they were. And it took me a while for that to sink in. What happened, of course, was all the men on either side of me or in front of me, everyone except one was

killed right off the bat. In the, you know, in the first minute or two. And, uh – I'm breathing heavily. [laughter] That always happens.

VELONA: Yeah. Take your time.

HEANEY: [laughter] Well, everybody except my what we call the RT - I had a little head headquarters group of three or four guys, radio man, forward observer to help them mortars bear in on a, you know, or artillery bear in on a target. I had a medic, I had one machine gun crew that I had asked to come forward when the ambush started and lay down as much fire as they could out ahead. Just make a lot of noise and make them think about getting any closer to us. And then I sort of went into, and I sort of describe this in this combat memoir I'm writing. It was like putting on the invisible cloak in a kind of a *Harry Potter* situation where, you know, they couldn't see me, so it was safe to stand up and direct guys to positions, fill any holes, gaps in the line, get ready to talk to the company commander again, and try to help anybody that we could see was wounded, but still alive. And then I took a position in the perimeter myself and the ambush just continued without a lot of movement forward or back, it was kind of all stuck in our positions the enemy and us. And my forward observer, who was one of the guys in my little headquarters group and that means he would be right near me, he had come back and he had taken a position next to me on the line and was looking out and firing his rifle.

And then he got shot in the head. But it wasn't a direct – it was a grazing wound. But, you know, I could see the track of the round. He was bleeding and he was totally disoriented and trying to pour water on his head, I think because the wound probably stung or hurt, and he thought this would give him some relief. And within a short period of time, he died, he just expired. I figured that was going to happen. So, within a few minutes, you know, I lost 10 guys. All those guys I just mentioned.

And about that time the company commander came on and said, "Mike. We got to –" Well, he wouldn't have called me Mike. We were pretty good about that. He would have called me by my codename. [I don’t know] how the enemy would ever figure out American football terms. That's what the battalion commander, the quirky one, that's what he wanted to do. So, everybody got a football position as a name. The company commander, he was very gentle, actually. Instead of just ordering "Well, go out there and rescue those guys." He said, "Okay, let's decide what to do. What do you think?" And I said, "Sir, I don't think anybody's alive out there. Because if there were, the enemy would be mingling among them. They certainly aren't putting up any resistance and the enemy would kill them. And that may have happened, I really don't know. But he really wanted, he said, "we gotta make a try." And that was the hardest order I ever had in the military. I really did not want to go outside our perimeter. And so, I picked two sergeants. I'm sorry, one sergeant who was a squad leader, a guy named Long, and a southerner, and a drunk. I didn't care at that point if he was a drunk. [laughter] I just wanted a guy who could shoot.

VELONA: Was he drunk in that moment, you think?

HEANEY: No, he was not drunk. He didn't get drunk in the field, but whenever we were back, he'd drink too much.

VELONA: And this conversation that you had with your commander, you had you had fallen back about 50 or so feet?

HEANEY: Yes.

VELONA: And there was some cover, or?

HEANEY: There wasn't much - there were some trees. It was a thickly canopied area and there wasn't a lot of undergrowth.

VELONA: Okay.

HEANEY: It was pretty – the lines of sight, the fields of fires, as they call them, a military term, were pretty open. But there were some mature trees and big enough to get behind and feel that we had some cover. It wasn't great, but it was some and we didn't have time to build -- to dig foxholes and actually we never did. And so, the captain and I are having this discussion and I finally said, "Okay, Sir, we'll make a try, and I'll round up a couple of my guys, my enlisted men, and we'll come up with a little plan of action." And he said to me, the captain said to me, "You're not going on this." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "You're the platoon leader. You don't go on this stuff. This is for a couple of guys, enlisted men." And I said, "Well, okay, I'll see how it goes. And I picked two guys. One was, as I said, a squad leader and the other one was a Filipino who had enlisted in order to get citizenship. His name was Ovena and I always thought he was the best solider I had. A soldier's soldier. He knew how to do everything, he kept his gear clean, he had a good sense of humor. He always was the one who would always volunteer to do things, he was a strong guy. A strong, young man. So, I picked him and the three of us were talking and there was a huge limb, a huge tree trunk, rather, lying flat on the ground across the direction we were trying to move in. I said, "Okay, Ovena, you go to one side – one end of the trunk and the sergeant, whose name I forget, it might have been Sergeant Bayer. Anyway, it doesn't matter. He said "Okay, gotcha. Well, I'll go around the other end and we'll at least have two weapons on them from different angles. They probably won't see us both at the same time. And I said, "Okay, that sounds good."

And I was just shaking with fear. We all were. And I had a talk with God then, and I had a talk with myself. I said, "You're not ordering men to go forward into this unless you go with them." It came out sort of automatically. I don't think I really wanted to say those things. [laughter] I'm sure I didn't, but t I also didn't want to order men who could quite likely get killed right in front of me, right there. And I also felt "Well, the captain's doing the right thing by his calculus, but I just can't do that without adding a little to the strength of the men I'm sending out there. So, all three of us, anyway. Oh, and I had my talk with God. I didn't tell anybody that story for years because it sounded like I was

blowing my own trumpet. And I didn't feel that way at the time, whatever maybe the truth of that. I felt like that was my best bet. [laughter]

So I told God - and maybe you've read this somewhere. I've told it now in the last, you know, 12 or 13 years. I said, "Okay, this is what we're going to do. And if you have to take any more of my guys, anymore from my platoon, take me because they've given enough. And I don't want to lose any more." And I finished that little announcement [laughter] and said, "Now, what the hell have you done, Michael? Can I have that back, God?" And, of course, nobody answered. Not right then, anyway.

So, we went out very slowly, very quietly as we could be, and Ovena was the first one to spot one enemy soldier that was kind of moving toward us. He told me this later, I didn't know what was going on then. And there was a shot or two going both ways and everybody was done as flat as they could get, hiding behind whatever they could. And Ovena took a shot and then he came back a few yards and said, "I got him, Sir. I don't know if I killed him, but I hit him. I think he won't be a problem anymore." I said, "Good for you." I said, "Hang on a second. I called the company commander back and told him what I knew. I didn't know the whole story, but, and he said, "Okay, I think we did" – we all meaning the friendly forces who are not supposed to abandon anybody in the field who's alive and that's true, but we didn't think there was any American alive out there. And he said, "Okay, you've done enough. Bring everybody in." [laughter] "Did you go out there, Heaney, against my orders?" He didn't say that. I think he knew. And we never talked about it again. It didn't need to be talked about.

The way God answered me, I've always felt, was not to take any more men from my platoon. He didn't. No more of them died, although a large number of them did. What was I about to say?

VELONA: You were saying that, although you had made the promise to God...

HEANEY: Oh, yeah. I realized, once this whole thing was over that God didn't take any more of my men and, you know, I'm the kind of guy, David, I'm not an in-your-face Christian and some days, some mornings when I wake up, I'm not a Christian at all. I'm not a religious person at all. It's ironic I married a pastor, but she's that way too. She's very matter of fact, not in your face.

VELONA: Right.

HEANEY: See if you can help out. So, this was kind of an unusual thing for me to do, but I'm certainly it came out the way it did. And I've always thought, I got wounded, I got hit at the very end of the skirmish, the ambush. And I've always felt that was kind of a deal. That was the deal that God and I made with each other. He wouldn't take any more of my men, but he was going to make it hurt. It was going to cost something and that was perfectly appropriate. It's just strange, maybe to say that or think that way, but it seemed like the right resolution to me. I let it go.

VELONA: How were you hit?

HEANEY: Toward the end. The whole encounter lasted about somewhere between 10 and 12 hours. So, it went through the night. Over the course of the night, the shooting died down quite a bit and the enemy was tired, and they were scared, and they were running out of stuff, but we realized by then, and they also outnumbered us quite a bit. So, the officers crawled into the middle of perimeter and we had a little chat and everybody seemed to think the best idea was, they usually, if they're going to boogie in the morning, they're going to do it just as the sun's coming up. That was their pattern. And if they didn't have success, they'd clear the field, leave the field at that point. And so, in order to screw that up and maybe distract them, we'll try to guess when they're gonna start their firing at us and maybe assaulting us again and that might prematurely set off an assault on their part. But we'd maintain our positions, we'd pick out mutually reinforcing fields of fire where we could see where our rounds were going and just hold our position. And so we tightened up the perimeter a little bit. I moved back to a point on the perimeter where I could fire out effectively and see what was attacking us.

I remember seeing a dead North Vietnamese soldier on my path that I was crawling along to get to the perimeter. I couldn't see any wounds on him, and I thought he was, for a minute, I thought "he's still alive. He's waiting until I crawl past him and he's going to shoot me. So maybe I should shoot him again." I said, "That's ridiculous. You'd be shooting a dead man. You're just gonna scare everybody, and so I gave up that idea. And the guy was dead, so that worked out okay. [laughter]

VELONA: Right.

HEANEY: When I got to the perimeter, just about the time I got to the perimeter, they started a mortar barrage. They hadn't used their mortars up until that time, and the way they had them registered, there were probably two or three. And these were big mortars. Their mortars were bigger than ours. They started hitting us with the mortars with great effectiveness. Those mortars were coming down all over the place and on us from high up. They were probably rounds that were rigged so as to detonate if the round came in contact with anything, like tree branches or, you know, high canopy. So, they were going off over our heads and that gave the spread of the distribution of mortar shrapnel, a lot of effect. A lot of guys were getting hit, crying, moaning.

They had seen and then suddenly, I felt like somebody had taken a hatchet or a bat or something and swung it and hit my right calf with it as hard as he could, and it hit me so hard, it took my breath away for a minute, and I looked down at this muddy ground that I was lying on, you know, I had you know dug little holes with my hands against the pain. There was another sergeant from another platoon, I didn't know him that well. I said, "Sergeant, can you see where I'm wounded?" And he looked at me, and I could see, he was just on the verge of panic, we probably all were. But I could see he was, and he said, "You'll be all right, sir. No problem. Don't worry about it." I said, "Yeah, but am I bleeding somewhere?" Because I was afraid of bleeding out. And he said, "You'll be fine. You just relax, Lieutenant." [laughter] I said, "Yeah, that's a good idea. I'll just

relax." [laughter] And so I said to myself, "This isn't going anywhere, so I kept crawling back into the middle of the perimeter, found a guy who was part of the company headquarters' personnel and he took out his bayonet and he cut my pant leg off and I had a good wound and it was pumping out like a stuck pig and I was getting lightheaded. And I'm saying, "Yeah, you gotta stop the bleeding or you're gonna - you're in shock now, probably, and you're going to bleed out and die. And wouldn't that be too bad after you got this far."

But this other guy, I can almost remember his name, he was a private. Anyway, he was very good. He did everything I asked, he knew some of what to do and he put some, I think they used sulfanilamide then, this antiseptic. There was no pain medicine left anywhere in the company. All the medics were dead, all five. We had a medic in each platoon and a company medic that stayed in the middle of the perimeter. They were all dead. One grabbed a rifle, the company medic. What the hell was his name? It doesn't matter. A good guy. Tall, strong. He wanted to get in this fight, and he grabbed a rifle that nobody was using and moved out to the perimeter himself. And about the same time he got there, he got shot. Not too far from where I had been initially, and so I yelled at him "No more men up here. You're safe where you are. Stay there." Because it also became obvious as I was going through my little scene trying to stay alive, that the fire from around the perimeter at us was diminishing. They had to get the hell out of there. And I don't blame them. They left a lot – about 70 guys on the field, dead.

VELONA: Was the gunfire from both sides pretty constant or was there more of lulls and picking up?

HEANEY: It varied a lot, David, in the sense that they had signaling devices. Whoever was leading them just down below the ridgeline had a whistle and a few different noises he could make. And I think they had planned an assault. I'm sure they planned an assault. So, he was probably trying to get them up and charge us and they were getting knocked down a lot when they tried to do that. The firing might then – and we were shooting back, and they were shooting us.

Danny was the company medic's first name. It's funny. It's important to me to remember the name. Say the name, like the Black Lives Matter people do now. They deserve that. Anyway, so there'd be some periods where there'd be no firing at all and some periods where there'd be intense fire, almost a steady sound of firing.

VELONA: As a lieutenant, were you personally returning fire, you know, when the ambush began? Do you have any sense of how many rounds you fired yourself?

HEANEY: I did engage in return fire. Not a whole lot. Partly because that's not the primary job of the platoon leader. He's supposed to be showing people where to go, filling gaps up, trying to help morale, trying to attend to wounded if I could, and there was nobody else to do it. But towards the beginning when we formed up, a kind of a raggedy perimeter, I was trying to think, "how can I be most helpful here? What can I do?" And I said, "I know, I'll fire off a magazine, 20 rounds." Those 20 rounds leave the

muzzle in less than two seconds. So, it almost sounds like, with an M-16, so it almost sounds like a steady sound.

And I said, "I'll fire a whole magazine, and I'm sure, like in the John Wayne movies, there must be an enemy or two up in the trees shooting down at us because they're still hitting us sometimes, even though we're flat on the ground. We couldn't see each other, so how could that be? But I'm going to do that anyway. And I'm going to shoot up in the trees." So, I did. I kind of swept the area with my M-16, full-automatic. And after nobody fell out of a tree. [laughter] So I said, "Michael. That's probably not a good use of ammunition and you're going to run out really fast if you keep doing that. So, I didn't shoot any more rounds like that. Every once in a while, if I sensed movement ahead of me in the perimeter, I might shoot off a round or two, but that was really useless from an infantry point of view. Wait till you see a target because you could quite easily run out of ammunition in a situation like that, where we couldn't get out.

VELONA: Right.

HEANEY: And I had moved to different places on the perimeter where my men were, just to talk to them, seeing how they were doing. They were very solicitous of me. I'll always be thankful for that. My platoon sergeant, Hunt, who, in the meantime, before this ambush, this operation - they ended up calling it Crazy Horse, like I said, which is just – that's crazy. He had been reassigned to another platoon in the same company because he had a lot of experience and the new platoon leader in that other platoon was brand new. And so that was the correct Army thing to do. I was devastated, I didn’t not want to lose him – because I loved the man, and he was so good in the field. I wanted him to be with us. And he told me later he felt the same way. It was a bad day for him. But you know, if the Army tells you something, you do it.

He crawled from across most of the perimeter from the new platoon where he was to where I was, he found me. I wasn't too far from where he started out, and he'd been shot in the fat, he, he said, "I've been shot in the fat." So that's probably not a lethal wound. [laughter] It wasn't. We ended up in the same place in the hospital later. But I said, "What the hell are you doing here, Sergeant?" "I just came to see how you're doing." And I said, "Really?" He said, "Yeah, what'd you think?" [laughter] And I don't know what I said. I said something like, you know, "That's so kind of you," or "You're a good man, Sam." I remember at one point, while we were having a very brief discussion. He said, "And remember, Lieutenant. We ain't getting out of this alive." And I said, "What the fuck? That's a hell of a thing to say, Sergeant." And he said, this is when we were on the perimeter. He said, "Oh, sir. Don't be worried. I just meant in a general sense, we're all gonna die."

[laughter]

VELONA: Wow.

HEANEY: I said, "Okay, you got your sense of humor, that's good."

[laughter]

VELONA: Oh, wow.

HEANEY: It was quite a day, quite a 24-hours.

[laughter]

VELONA: I'm sure.

HEANEY: So, he went back to his platoon and he made it out.

VELONA: So, he was able to walk around, even after having been wounded?

HEANEY: Yes, he was. It probably hurt a lot because you know you stretched tissue, that's already been pretty abused, but when I saw him in the hospital, this was probably about a week later. I might have written this, I've told this story before on tape, but I got to the Army General Hospital, still in Vietnam, after going back through An Khe in the field hospital there. And so, now I'm in Nha Trang waiting to get shipped to Japan and to have some work done on my leg. And the one of the things the round did when it went through is it severed what they call the posterior tibular nerve, the nerve that goes down right behind your shinbone to your foot. And it's a big nerve and it's buried deep in your leg on purpose, so you don't you don't get slightly wounded or grazed or something in that part of your leg, it doesn't hurt like hell. And this, it really, really hurt.

The doctor, one of the doctors came around and said, "So yeah, unfortunately, the nerve is severed. I'm sure you're going to see a neurologist later to see if there's anything we can do." They weren't sure, but "I can see you're in a lot of pain we'll try to give you as much Demerol as we can. It was the narcotic they were using. But, you know, we can't give you as much as we'd like because it's just too addictive and it's the best advice I got. [laughter] So there I am, and when the doctor left, I was sobbing quietly, trying to be discreet and not make a fuss. And Sergeant Hunt was making his way over to where I was in bed. I was in bed at this point. And this nurse, a young lieutenant like me came up and she leaned over in my ear and said, "Lieutenant. Some of your men are here. You can't carry on like that. You can't cry." And just at that moment, Sergeant Hunt arrived and he said, "Ma'am, no disrespect, this here lieutenant, he don't have to apologize to nobody. You leave him alone." [laughter]

VELONA: Wow.

HEANEY: And she got all flustered, and later, I told her, "Listen, how long you been over here?" And she said, "When I talked to you, I'd been here two days" [laughter] "and I was totally freaked up, I'm sorry." I said, "You don't owe me any apologies. It's kind of a normal Army thing to say to somebody and, you know, you're learning new stuff. Good

luck." So, it came out okay, but the point of the whole story is that Sergeant Hunt just would always go to bat for me. We became really close.

VELONA: Right. Mm hmm. So, you were wounded, and it was already totally dark at that point?

HEANEY: It was just starting to lighten up.

VELONA: Oh, okay.

HEANEY: The barrage started around sunup. It was starting to lighten up, dawn, and we could tell – the whole previous time. The sky was overcast, there was a drizzle. We were all cold because of those things. But it was like it was an orchestrated, scripted part of a movie, the sun comes up, the sky clears out. Now, there are all kinds of armed helicopters flying around, and they knew where we were by then and firing into the woods to try to suppress enemy fire, but the enemy decided pretty quickly that they were spent, and they lost a lot of men. 75 is a lot of men.

VELONA: Right.

HEANEY: And they boogied.

VELONA: Right. And so, were you taken on a medevac helicopter?

HEANEY: Yes, but first, there were no landing zones on the path up to the ridge line. No open spaces big enough to accommodate a Huey, so two of my guys that were not wounded picked me up, put one of my arms over each of their shoulders, and we walked. First, they made me a little litter out of a poncho and some logs, sticks and said, "This is really going to work fine for you, Lieutenant." One of them was Ovena, I remember looking at him. They said, "Lie down on the poncho and we'll straighten it up a little bit as we tie you into it." So, he got me down, tied me in, and I said "Oh, good. I don't have to walk anymore." They lifted me up off the ground and all the strings, the lines came loose, plopped me on the ground, and we all burst into laughter. Ovena said, "I think you can walk, Lieutenant. We'll help you." They did. I put my arms on their shoulders again and we walked down. I think I kind of, probably walked down on one leg. And every medic I passed, now I was passing medics from another reinforcing company. I didn't know any of these guys. Every medic that went by, they hadn't been in the fight, I said, "Oh, medic. I haven't had any medicine. I haven't had any Demerol - morphine." Morphine is what they used in the field. "I haven't had any morphine." And they said, "Poor guy, here let me give you a shot or two. How many do you want?"

[laughter]

VELONA: Oh my gosh.

HEANEY: By the time I got down to the landing zone, everything was cheery, I was happy as a clam, the weird battalion commander came tromping up in his peculiar way and I was so close to saying something really smart-ass to him. [laughter] Nobody liked him. It was just another Hollywood scene, you know, he turns around and says to nobody in particular, "Somebody get this man help!"

[laughter]

HEANEY: I was thinking, "What kind of help would that be, sir? Can I have some more morphine, you jerk?"

VELONA: How vague.

HEANEY: How vague, yeah. But, you know, you have a real cast of characters in any situation like that. And some of them do just the perfect things, or the brave things, and some of them don't. It's okay. That's the way it is.

VELONA: Right. So, I recognize that we have gone over the time that you agreed to participate. I still have some more questions, but I just wanted to check in with you and see how you're-

HEANEY: That's fine, that's fine. My wife has a meeting, anyway, this is not going to disturb her routine. How long do you think, I know you can't predict these things, but it's 25 after 7. How long would you like to go?

VELONA: Maybe just another- I just wanted to basically touch on your role in the documentary. The Ken Burns and Lynn Novick documentary and just kind of talk about the experience of telling your story, just briefly.

HEANEY: Okay. Super, well their story really deserves to be told, too, so I'm glad.

VELONA: So, I just want to start with, what was the first time that you remember telling this story that you just old me, of the ambush?

HEANEY: Well, actually the first time I told it, it was probably about a week after getting wounded after we got down to the landing zone and got in a helicopter. Sergeant Long was in a litter over my head. I was the next one down and we took off and this is something that I mention only because it's pretty rare. I said, "Who's up there?" He said, "Lieutenant, it's Sergeant Long. How are you doing?" I said, "Well, I'm alive." And he said, "Me too." And he put his hand down below my litter, so I can see his hand come down and I knew it was Sergeant long. And "How are you doing, Sergeant?" "Oh, I could use a drink." [laughter] And I said, "I'm glad you're here. I'm glad you made it out okay." And I took his hand. And we held hands the whole ride home, you know, about ten or fifteen minutes. I've often that's so ironic. It's so different. I'm glad it happened. You know, here's two guys, completely different backgrounds, lives, prejudices. I'm sure if he's still alive he's a Trump supporter.

Not that that mattered. We were two human beings just happy to feel human presence and flesh. And love. That doesn't happen a lot, especially with males.

VELONA: Right.

HEANEY: So, that's good. We get back to the field hospital at An Khe. And a couple of days, they did a lot of debridement, I think is the word. Cutting away of injured tissue and, you know, chatting occasionally, I was really exhausted, as you can imagine, so sleeping a lot. I think the medical staff, the first night I was in the general hospital, General, I want to say, Thomas or Thompson, or somebody, he was the commanding general of the division. Somebody woke me up and here's this guy looking down with two stars and that registered. "Holy shit, two stars. This guy's a general and here he is at the side of my bed," and the only thing I could think of was, "Okay, sit up and show some respect," so I sat up and immediately passed out.

[laughter]

VELONA: Oh my gosh.

HEANEY: And then I came to again, and he said, "Don't. Just stay there, Lieutenant, it's okay. It's okay. You did well. I want you to summarize for me what you remember because I want to tell the folks back home about your company and how well it stood up under really bad circumstances. So, I kind of trotted out something, but anyway he was there because he was what we used to call a private's general. A general that loved the men and treated them right and did extra things for them. He had that reputation. All I could do was pass out.

[laughter]

HEANEY: Then I got shipped – I got flown on a plane down to Nha Trang, which is a coastal city in South Vietnam and was there for about a week and then the episode with the nurse happened. And the nurses were great. I was actually very sympathetic to her situation to come on a scene like that where there's body parts and blood and you don't really know what's going on. It's hard. Anyway, they flew us, a bunch of us on litters, to the Philippines and as soon as I could come to and be relatively aware and conscious, I wrote a letter to my parents because I knew that on its way to them was a telegram from the Pentagon, you know, "We regret to inform you" – I don't know if they actually say that – but they your son's been wounded in action. And that's it. And my mother said later on, when I got home, that's what your dad said, you know, "What do you mean, that's it?" [laughter] Dad was not one to take stuff like that, you know, lightly. He started calling everybody he knew, he burst into tears and marched up into the bedroom and then he came down, or so I get from my mother, of course, later. I wasn't there.

But I wrote a letter the first thing I did when I got to the Philippines. I asked one of the staff, get me an envelope and some writing paper and they did. And I wrote a letter which now strikes me as being - I didn't put my emotions in it. I couldn't possibly do that.

All I could do in a very matter of fact tone, "so here's what happened and I'm okay." And I said that first. And "I'm going to be home soon, don't worry. I may lose my leg." Because that's what they were telling me then, but I said, "I'm gonna fight that with everything I got, so don't worry about that. Don't worry about your son losing his leg." And that letter actually got to them before the telegram from the Pentagon and in a way, well, not in a way, I'm really glad it did because although it was a hard letter to receive and to understand, it was certainly a lot better than "Yeah. Your husband's wounded in action – your son is wounded."

VELONA: Yeah.

HEANEY: That could mean anything, you know – “he got decapitated, he's still alive somehow.”

[laughter]

HEANEY: So that got me to Japan, and where they did several procedures and they actually did put my nerve back together and the doctor there, a neurologist, a great guy. He said "This has got a 50% success rate. Nerves grow very slowly. They don't always regenerate at all, but it's up to you. And if you want to try it, I'm willing to do my best." And so, he did, and by the end of about a year I had enough partial feeling in my feet, my right foot, so that if I stepped on a really hot surface, I could tell. If I stepped on glass I could tell, but that was about it. But even that is useful. Then you can't burn your foot off.

VELONA: Right. So, as you encountered more people who were not there with you at the ambush, did you find – how did you find the experience of telling them, or were you not very forthright with telling the story? Did you not like to tell the story at first, at least?

HEANEY: Yeah. I think parts of all of those are true and your last question was about "Do you remember the first time you told the story?" And that's what I was getting into when I got on the Philippines and began to. Another thing that happened while I was still in the Philippines was they passed around the phone. After asking you for your home number and they said, "if you want to get hooked up, we can let you talk for about two to three minutes. That's all we can spend because everybody's in the room, a lot of injured guys would love a chance to talk to a parent or a loved one. And so, I said, "Yeah." And it was one of those conversations where in in two or three minutes, I probably said a couple of sentences. I just was so full of emotion and different kinds of emotions that were flying back and forth. And my mother, finally, who she's dead now but she was a very observant and empathetic woman. She finally said, "Mike. Don't say anymore. We can feel the emotion and you've told us what we needed to know, that you're alive and okay and there'll be a time for this." And I thanked her. I could barely get it out.

I didn't have, with my parents, an extended conversation about this ever, but one of the first things they did when I got home was "We know you kept a diary over there. Would

you mind us reading?" And I said, "No, that'd be good. That explains a lot that I'm just not ready to talk about." And it turns out that I wish I had found the courage to talk about it.

I wrote all my – the next of kin of all my men. One of the very nice things about moving couple weeks ago, was I got letters back from those next of kin from almost all of the guys the wounded or dead guys that had been in my platoon that day. And they all wrote back, which is the last thing I thought they'd want to do. It was next of kin of deceased men, these are these are people who lost husbands, sons, spouses. I only wrote one letter a day because I didn't want it to sound like a form letter and they all wished me well or said, "Write back and tell me how you're doing, you know, we're so worried about you." People who had just lost someone very close to them and didn't really know anything more than what that stupid telegram says. But my parents both read the diary more than once. And I think they sensed that was plenty. That was all they needed to know.

VELONA: Do you feel – it seems as though you have a feeling of responsibility to tell the story, not for yourself or for your own purposes, but for the memory of the men who died. Would you say – is that right, you think?

HEANEY: That's absolutely right and I've sort of jokingly, but not jokably – I used a word that's not a word. Anyway.

VELONA: It happens.

[laughter]

HEANEY: It happens. As you can imagine, I've given a lot of presentations about Vietnam in general. Sometimes it's pretty specific about the ambush and the sorrow and trying to help other vets and all that stuff. And I probably now, every time I go to do that, I say, "I don't want you guys, you people who have been good enough to come, you know, listen to my story, don't worry if I cry or tears come down. That's something I do. Even my kids don't kid me anymore. They just sat, "Oh that's Dad." And the other thing I say, "don't feel uncomfortable. I'm okay. That's the way I react to this hard story to tell." I said, "the other thing is, you've probably guessed this already, this is definitely a mission of mine in life. One of my life's mission. One of the few." I was so close to those guys. They were such good guys. They deserve a voice and I want to do what I can to give them a voice, so I never say no to somebody who is hinting at "would he come to their high school class? Would he come to our rotary? Would he come to our college class?" I never say no. I mean, I tailor what I say to the circumstances in the group it is. People get that, I think.

Especially now, we've come a lot further. World War II vets didn't want to talk – they didn't talk, whether they wanted to or not. They didn't talk about their experience until now, really. Till very late in the game for them. So there's more of an understandable, of course, that's a story you want to get out for a lot of reasons, but the main reason is I

can give those guys a voice and an expression of love and what they deserve from you as listeners, you know, to listen and try to put yourselves in their shoes and remember that before we engage in any war, and I'm not a pacifist, I'm not strong enough to be a pacifist. But you need to put in the calculation. Am I going to vote for this war or not? What it does to human beings, often human beings who have very little say in the matter. They're doing what they've been asked to do and, too bad, it costs them their lives. But we should honor that. And so that's what I'm going to do what while I have the chance. I don't think it's out of control by any means with me. Some people have suggested, Tim O'Brien writes about this at one point. Some people have suggested, "You gotta put that behind you, Mike" and I know what they mean. They're trying to be positive, but it's like the most transformative experience in my life and such sacrifice that I saw. I got to put that behind me? No, you can put it behind you, that's okay, I won't be offended. But I'm not putting it behind me.

VELONA: Right. That makes that makes a lot of sense to react to that in that way.

HEANEY: Yeah. Oh, good.

VELONA: So, given the gravity of feeling the need to tell this story to others, how did you feel from going from giving your own talks or presentations, which was just you talking or telling the story, how did you feel transitioning to working within this documentary series made by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick on the Vietnam War, where they had their own vision of how to tell a broader story of the war? How did you feel about your role within that?

HEANEY: Yeah, well, in a nutshell, I felt very good about my role in terms of it being an opportunity for me to, on a more grandiose level than my words – about this war and the people who served in it and how hard war is on the people that are trapped in it. You know, civilians, children, old people. Personally, I like Ken Burns a lot, you know, we’ve had – he's really good at involving people that are with him in whatever the discussion is. And Lynn is the person chiefly responsible in their group for making that documentary present a lot of Vietnamese voices from all areas of society. Burns told a group, he was speaking to, I was there, that have none of that would have been in there if it was just him. Lynn was the one who made the trips to Vietnam, found the interpreters, found the people with the wartime experience, and she deserves as much credit as Ken Burns and she's a good person. They're both good people, I think.

You know, politics. The political pushback was never as strenuous as some people felt. Some GI's who spoke on camera, I think, there was pushback against things that GI's said that could be taken as "you're portraying all of us as, you know, potheads and drug addicts and killers and all this stuff, so I'm not gonna watch that movie or say anything nice about it." And I can understand that view. That's not the way I reacted at all, but I can see why some people, maybe out of an excess of what they regard as patriotism, or because they want to do the same thing I want to do, and that's give these guys a voice that lifts them up and honors them for the sacrifices they made. But everybody's going to have his own take.

I think Ken was a little disappointed that the documentary wasn't more of a splurge than it was and I know Professor Ed[ward] [Miller], I hope this isn't telling tales out of school, and if it is you can just delete it. I don't think Ed felt that the academic world, not the whole academic world, but the academic world that concerns itself with the history of Vietnam, you could say he devoted his life to that. I might have been a little disappointed, too that it didn't bring people in large numbers back to an examination of that was and an examination of what it cost us and the Vietnamese, especially, so that it's in our consciousness now when we consider a war. The wars that, I think, that we've gotten involved in since Vietnam haven't displayed a lot of better understanding of what happened there because we have an historical lesson that's greatly detailed and fleshed out. So, why didn't we follow up on it? I have my own theories about that, but anyway, they're not important. This was a huge effort on Ed's part, you can imagine. This interview program, which I think is wonderful for a variety of reasons, he ought to be given more credit, but maybe I'm just allowing myself to sympathize with the ones I know best and agree with. [laughter]

VELONA: Right. So, you feel a sense of personal gratification for being able to tell your story within the documentary, but you think overall, in terms of a – well, I'll just ask, how do you feel the documentary played a role in forming a collective memory of the war?

HEANEY: It's sort of an anecdotal answer to that, but I can't tell you how many people from all walks of life, including a lot of Vietnam veterans, who have said in passing, talking about the documentary or the war, say something like, "You know, I watched that movie and I realized how much I didn't know about Vietnam. I thought I knew everything. I was there, for Pete's sakes. I was invested and yet, there's a lot more to it. You know, I'm left with feeling, “yeah, and why don't more people pick up on it?”

One of the moments in the movie that I value more than almost any other is Lynn is interviewing a Vietnamese soldier, a North Vietnamese soldier. He's old now, my age. [laughter] And he is telling a story about when the Americans first came and "now we knew we were going to have to dig in even harder," or something to that effect. "And my commander asked if I would go on a night patrol by yourself, sneak up on the American lines. He knew where Americans were but, they didn’t want to cause a big ruckus and get fired on, or ambushed, or killed, whatever." He said "Okay, I'll do it. So I went to where I could hear their voices and I stayed there a long time, listened, and I realized one of the things that was going on in the place that he was reconnoitering, was there's a dead GI and they were all hugging him, like they loved him." And then he said "It's such humanity. It shows such humanity on the part of the Americans." And then he ended by saying, "You know they're- it's just like us. They're just like us." And I remember the first time I saw that little short and said, "Yes." Why don't we understand that before we go to war? Before we go to war. You know, most of the rest of the world's just like us. It's something we all know as kids, we're told, you know, and then what happens to that understanding? So that's good. At least it's out there. [laughter] That message is out there. And a lot of GIs feel that way too, with the passage of time and

the softening of the heart. Vietnamese culture and folkways and values, I value them. I think they are a lot like us. I wish I thought of that. [laughter] Anyway.

VELONA: Well, that definitely answers a lot of the questions I have about your perspective on the documentary and your experience telling your story so many times. When I was assigned you to interview, Professor Miller framed you as the celebrity narrator.

[laughter]

HEANEY: That would be nice.

VELONA: That everybody in the oral history world knows Mike Heaney.

[laughter]

VELONA: I recognize that we have gone far over the time that you agreed to and I am just so, so grateful for the chance to speak with you. So, I just want to thank you again for participating in the DVP Project. I do have to make a quick connection. Your connection to Dartmouth, aside from your friends whom you said you visited in college.

HEANEY: Yeah.

VELONA: So, you live in the upper valley and your wife is a [Dartmouth] graduate as well, right?

HEANEY: The actual, immediate cause of my involvement in this enterprise – the Vietnam thing – is years ago, when he and Lynn Novick were just starting to work on the documentary and word was going out about Ken Burns' next documentary's gonna be about the Vietnam War. And here's some of the things he hopes to cover. And so, it was out there as a buzz about it because of Ken Burns and who he is. My college roommate picked up from something he saw, probably on PBS and he called his brother and told his brother that the woman he was living with in Buffalo, New York, who was a great philanthropist and had a big foundation and was totally in support of this documentary, the Vietnam War. And my roommate told his twin brother all about my involvement, although it hadn't solidified yet and he then said to his brother, "You need to call Michael, because you know him too and tell him to call that office down in New York and have them put him in the documentary!"

[laughter]

HEANEY: What I heard is, "Oh, so that's the way it works. You know, you take an aggressive posture. [laughter] But it actually almost worked that way. I contacted the office in New York and explained a little bit. "Oh, well, that sounds interesting. If we'd like to hear more, we'll be in touch." And I said, "Oh, Jesus. I must have offended her,

somehow it doesn't sound very good." And then a few weeks later I get a call from, uh, the woman. Ken's sidekick here.

VELONA: Lynn Novick.

HEANEY: Lynn Novick, thank you, I'm getting tired. And she couldn't have been sweeter, and she said, "Okay, this is going to sound strange, but would you be willing to come down and meet me at Grand Central Station? There's the restaurant there right on the big room. And we'll talk for a little bit about your experience and I'll get to know you, et cetera." I said, "Oh yeah, sure. I'll come." And I got on a train, you still get on the train in Windsor [VT] and I went all the way down to Grand Central Station one day, at the appointed hour and met Lynn. We talked for probably three hours and then I stood up and got ready to go back to Vermont and I leaned forward and said, "Lynn, let me just confess something to you. I now realize I've done what my father, and you know how much I admired him, would always tell me when I was a young man and starting to date, don't do what most young men do, which is to talk about themselves the whole evening! And that's exactly what I just did. [laughter] And I'm sorry, but you were so good at your interviewing." And she said, "Hey, that's exactly what I wanted you to do is talk about yourself. This isn't a documentary about Lynn Novick. And so, we kind of hit it off and she was always a very generous supporter. I came at the documentary saying, "What do they want to hear from me for? I'm not in that world." But it was really a blessing for me.

And by the way, you're a great guy. And I could tell that from our little, however much time we spent together, you're very thoughtful about your questions, I'm sure you thought about them a lot, probably before you came to this thing and you're very perceptive, particularly in this role and it reminds me of what, you know, I was a lawyer for years of my life. What they always tell lawyers who are starting out and they have to learn how to depose somebody, how to do a deposition, which is under oath and a lot's at stake. All new lawyers, maybe they're doing this for the first time, it's not their fault. They'll have a stack of papers, you know 25 pages with all their questions written out, and then they start to go through the stack verbatim. They don't hear when the witness, the deponent, says something like, "Oh yeah, this probably isn't important, but that's the moment I determined I was going to kill that guy." And the person taking the deposition goes right on to the next question.

[laughter]

HEANEY: I'm saying, "Wait! Stop, stop!"

[laughter]

VELONA: You missed something important!

HEANEY: So, you do that. You listen to the answers that are given and you when it's appropriate, you follow up and that's where you get some of your best moments, I think,

on the interviewing business. And you certainly put people at ease. It's easy to laugh with you. So those are all really good things, David.

VELONA: I really appreciate you saying that, that means a lot. This is definitely my first full oral history interview, but I'm hoping maybe I can - it's something that I can continue. Before we stop the recording, I want to ask if there's anything you think that that we didn't cover that you want to include that maybe we passed over?

HEANEY: Yeah. Nothing comes to mind, I think was pretty thorough, very thorough actually, but if I think of something out of the blue, I know we won't be all set up like this, or maybe will, I don't know. I certainly got out what I things I feel more strongly about. I'll just mention one thing. Tim O'Brien, he's not exactly a hero of mine, but I'm a great admirer of his writing and the way he writes and the way he suggests to people who want to be writers, how they write, how they approach something. I think the book, *The Things They Carried* can almost be a manual on, here's how you write. A fantastic realism – that's not the right term, but whatever. And the best thing I thought he wrote in *The Things They Carried* was, in the – it might have been in the chapter "The Things They Carried," but anyway, he's talking about the soldier's life, the GI's life, and an encounter he has with an older woman in the audience who says, "You know, you gotta move forward, Tim, and get out of this." And it's almost the last line in the chapter, he says "She just doesn't get it. A war story is not about war. It's about love. And I think I've thought about war that way for a long time. At least the way Tim O'Brien is using those words and in that case. He gets it. It helps that he was there as a soldier. But I think you get it too. [laughter] I think you get it too.

VELONA: I appreciate you saying that.

HEANEY: Alright.

VELONA: Well, with that, I just want to thank you once again. This has been wonderful, and I will stop the recording now.

HEANEY: Okay. Oh, you're very welcome.