

Interview with
EDWARD “ED” L. BLECKSMITH

October 15, 2018
October 22, 2018

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EDWARD "ED" L. BLECKSMITH

Edward "Ed" L. Blecksmith was interviewed by Randall J. Bunn on October 15 and 22, 2018 in St. George, Washington County, Utah. He related his military and career experiences. Also participating: Brady Fronk.

RB: We are going to talk about [your] time in the military and other aspects of [your] career. Were you born in Inglewood, California?

EB: Yes.

RB: You were one of two children and your parents were Harriet and Chuck Blecksmith. [How was it] growing up in the 1940s and 1950s in Southern California?

EB: I look back on that time as the golden age. Southern California was a fabulous place to grow up. You didn't have the crowds you have now. It was *Leave It to Beaver* on steroids. It really was. We moved to Covina [California] in 1951. During the summer I would have breakfast and be gone all day. Mom would never worry about it. I would be running the hills barefoot with a pair of shorts on. I paid a price for it later on when I went back to school in September because my feet were so tough from running barefoot through the hills that shoes were uncomfortable.

RB: Was your mother a stay-at-home mom?

EB: Yes.

RB: What did your dad do while you were growing up?

EB: Dad was, I guess you would call it, a district manager. He covered the seven western states for a company called Duncan Electric Manufacturing Company out of Lafayette, Indiana. They manufactured watt hour meters. His competitors were Sangamo [Electric Company], GE [General Electric] and Westinghouse. Dad was a good salesman. He was not slick, but he was honest and took care of his customers.

RB: Your brother was born in 1939 so he is about four years older than you. Did you and he pal around together much?

EB: No. I learned a lot from Steven [Blecksmith]. I learned from his mistakes and learned from his successes. If he made a mistake I made sure I didn't do it.

RB: You didn't have to follow in those footsteps and learn by experience.

EB: “Steve” had some learning disabilities or things we didn’t know about then. He was not a good athlete. He was not a good student. He hung out with a couple of [boys] that thought you shouldn’t be close to your parents. I can step back and see how that affected my folks. I made a conscious decision to do the opposite. I benefitted from it. I may write a book someday and will call it *Everyone Needs Rabbis in Their Life*. He needed a teacher. I was involved in music growing up.

RB: What kind of music?

EB: Clarinet. I loved classical music. I loved rock and roll too, but I loved and appreciated the light classical. I am not a [very] big long hair, but I love light classical music. It is pretty amazing. [When] I [was] into my freshman year of high school, I had a coach named Jim Munson. Jim basically pulled me out of my shell.

RB: Were you in a shell? Were you a quiet kid?

EB: I was a good athlete, but I was a little reticent to speak out too much or take the lead. I was always a campaign manager, but never a candidate.

RB: [Laughter] I understand.

EB: That changed my freshman year of high school. I was successful as a C football player. I never had played tackle football before. Hitting people was something I didn’t do naturally. I was third string quarterback on the C football team. I was six-one, 139 pounds and thirteen years old playing for a [coach] named Ed Herman. We had a smallish Mexican senior quarterback who [was] hurt against Chaffey High School [Ontario, California]. Then they put in the backup, second team, quarterback named Vince Forshan. Vince had a nasty habit of getting in fights. His first series of plays he gets in a fight. I am sitting on the bench with my helmet off. I looked at the San Gabriel Mountains and the blue sky. What a great day for a football game! Vince was kicked out of the game. The coach says, “Blecksmith, get in there.” Oh no!

RB: [Laughter]

EB: I put my helmet on. He says take it on a direct [snap] and run right, run left, run right. First time I touched the ball I went sixty-five yards for a touchdown! I was fast. I guess I was running scared all the time. That game I had four touchdowns.

RB: People probably stood up and noticed.

EB: That became our offense: run right, run left, run right.

RB: [Laughter]

EB: Then I got into C track. Jim Munson played football at USC [University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California] where he was a guard playing behind an all American by the name of John Ferraro. He was so positive. He was so upbeat. Being around people like that was contagious. It pulled me out of my shell. It pushed me beyond where I thought I could go. I had quite an amazing freshman year in track.

RB: What did you do in track?

EB: I ran the 100 yard dash, the 180 [yard dash]. They had the Chaffey Invitational and I led off the four-man half mile. They apologized to me because I used to run in the twenty-twos, on a curve for a lead off 220. That would have given you a varsity letter and [they were sorry they didn't] have a watch on [me]. I ran [the] 180 [yard dash in 18.2 seconds] which is pretty fast. Then I did [the] 400 yard dash [10.4 seconds].

RB: That is good.

EB: It was.

RB: And you were a freshman?

EB: A freshman. Then we were spinning off to the Covina High School at the time. [It] had 1,200 [students] in the freshman class. It was huge.

RB: That is huge!

EB: So there was a spinoff to two new high schools: the Edgewood High School in West Covina and Charter Oak High School out in Covina. I used to eat lunch. I would brown bag it. I would sit with a bunch of cute girls in the freshman class who were cheerleaders. They said, "'Eddie' why don't you run for student body president?" "No, that's okay." "You sign up and we will make your posters." And I won! It was a real coming out because it demonstrated to me that it is more fun to lead and do things than sit in back and complain about it when something doesn't go right. As a result, we were a new high school. Our good family friend was a dentist. He and I wrote a fight song and our alma mater. The alma mater was adopted by the high school. We got to pick the colors and the mascot name.

RB: That was great! You were in on the ground floor!

EB: We were the first two classes, the freshman and sophomore. Then we grew to three classes and then four classes. I was brilliant enough to be elected to student body president my senior year. So it was probably something that would never happen again, be president for two years of your high school. I was also elected, by my class, to be one of three speakers at the graduation. So Shirley [Delasbell]

and I were the two people who were voted on and then Eddie Loman, who was a neighbor, was valedictorian [and] he spoke.

RB: Did you do well academically in high school?

EB: I didn't do badly in high school. I got into USC. At the time, we didn't study for our SAT [Scholastic Aptitude Tests] We just kind of took it and didn't worry about it. Now it is so much more competitive.

RB: [When] you went to USC, did you live in the dorms or did you commute?

EB: No. I lived in Marks Hall my freshman year. I was on a football scholarship. For four years it was worth \$10,000.00. I mean \$10,000.00 won't even buy you a week anymore.

RB: [Laughter] True! You were on a football scholarship. Were you offered any other scholarships from other schools? Were you recruited at all?

EB: I applied to two schools: Stanford [University, twenty miles north of San Jose, California] and USC. Now you do ten or twelve [schools]. I was recruited by Berkeley [University of California], Occidental [College, Los Angeles, California], USC, Stanford [and] Dartmouth [College, Hanover, New Hampshire]. My dad went to Cal Poly [California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, California], but he loved USC. He [had] football tickets after World War II so I would go to USC games all the time.

RB: It was in your blood. [Laughter]

EB: It was. I would have had difficulty going anywhere else.

RB: You said earlier your academic career as an undergraduate was probably less than stellar.

EB: I did not apply myself and [that is] why I ended up as a C student. But when I went into the [United States] Marine Corps I was writing a letter home to my mom. It struck me that I would be embarrassed to go to an employer or potential employer and say I am a lot smarter than my transcript would indicate.

RB: [Did] you play football all four years?

EB: Five years. I was recruited my sophomore year. The year I redshirted we were national champions. In 1962 we were national champions, 11-0. We beat Wisconsin in the Rose Bowl 42 to 37. It was a classic game. We had some great athletes. Even though I didn't play in games that year it was the best team I ever played on. There was a chemistry to it. If you were on a JV [team] which I was

you knew that if somebody ahead of you [was] hurt you were moving up. So you better keep your head in the game.

At the time, you may remember back in the early 1960s there was a three platoon system. LSU [Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana] had a coach named Paul Dietzel, I think his name was. He made a big name for himself. His third team was primarily a defensive oriented team nicknamed the Chinese Bandits. They did [very] well. The red team for us could go both ways. The green team which was quarterbacked with Bill Nelson, who went on to play with the Cleveland Browns, was more offensive oriented. The gold team was also good on offense, but they were primarily defense.

RB: And that worked?

EB: Yes, it did, very well.

RB: Were you involved in ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps] at all in college? Or anything military?

EB: No.

RB: Had you even considered going into [the] military [when] you were in college?

EB: I got to know the officer instructor, [the] OI. He was a Marine major.

RB: You said INI [Inspector Instructor.]

EB: He is an officer instructor advisor to the NROTC [Naval Reserve Officers' Training Corps]. He was a marine major, a great [fellow]. I would go talk to him because I enjoyed the marines. My dad was in the Marine Corps. My brother was in the Marine Corps. I had an aunt and two uncles in the Marine Corps. He said you ought to join the PLC [Platoon Leaders Course]. "I am not going in the service." That was wishful thinking because Vietnam started to percolate a little bit.

RB: You graduated from high school in 1961 and in 1966 you graduated from USC.

EB: At that time the draft board was down my throat. I had had a couple of pre-induction physicals. I did not want to be a draftee where you don't have many opportunities to do what you want to do. After my junior year I was drafted by the Los Angeles Rams. You have little checks of things that you do and I got to know Elroy Hirsch. He was general manager at the time. I went to see Elroy in the spring of 1966. I said, "Is there any way you can get me into a reserve unit? I would like to try out for the Rams." He said, "George Allen is the new head coach and George isn't going to take any rookies." I said, "Well, I have the Marine

Corps.” He said, “Hell, I was in the Marine Corps. It was a great experience.” I said, “I know it was, but was there a war going on?” [Laughter]

BF: [Laughter]

RB: Different story! [Laughter]

EB: So I joined the Marine Corps. I am glad I survived it. I learned an awful lot.

RB: You had a BS [Bachelor of Science Degree] when you joined. Were you enlisted then?

EB: You were enlisted when you went in. When you start OCS, the Marine Corps called it OCC, Officer Candidate Course.

RB: Everybody is enlisted.

EB: You are all enlisted rank. You get paid as a PFC [Private First Class]. Then if you successfully complete OCS, you are commissioned in the Marine Corps. There were 800 going through our class. Up until the last week I was number one in the battalion. That is when all the other staff and platoon sergeants get involved. I finished eighth out of 800. Everybody who finished ahead of me was ex-enlisted. So they knew how to drill. They knew how to call cadence. They knew tactics.

RB: You hadn’t been exposed to it.

EB: One thing I do remember from OCS, was [that] out of 800 I finished number one physically. It was kind of neat because our battalion commander was a major. He introduced me as a big [fellow] and said, “Candidate Blecksmith is a stud.” [Laughter] It was kind of cool.

BF: [Laughter]

RB: Yes. [Did] you go to OCS right after you graduated from USC?

EB: I postponed it which ended up being a mistake. I could have gone in in August. I put [it] off until October 10, [1966 when] I started. I remember the date. The irony is that the [fellows] who went in in August because of casualties in Vietnam, made first lieutenant and four months later made captain. I happened to be at the wrong [time]. I made first lieutenant for eighteen months and then it was over a year and a half before I could make captain. They slowed the process down.

RB: How long was the OCS?

EB: Ten weeks.

RB: So sometime in December you graduated.

EB: [on] December 16, 1966.

RB: Where was this?

EB: [In] Quantico, Virginia.

RB: Is that where all the enlistees go?

EB: That is where the Marine [Corps] schools are located, period.

RB: What was your assignment after that?

EB: Every marine officer with the exception of those who had aviation assignments went from OCC down to Pensacola [Florida]. Everybody else went to the basic school. The Marine Corps primary officer school is called the basic school.

RB: Where is that?

EB: Also [at] Quantico, out in the boonies from the main site. Everybody now, whether they are going to aviation or any MOS [military occupational specialty] goes to the basic school because the infantry is the queen of battle. Every marine is there to support the grunt on the ground.

RB: It doesn't matter if you are a professional like a JAG [judge advocate general] or the doctors.

EB: Well, the doctors are Navy [officers].

RB: My understanding is that everyone is supporting the infantry.

EB: If you are aviation, if you are tanks, if you are artillery, if your supply —

RB: That is your primary —.

EB: — you are there to support the [fellow] on the ground.

RB: How long was the basic course?

EB: It is now six months. [Mine] was twenty-one weeks. I thought I would be smart. I qualified for language school. They said you can go either to language school or another assignment. I said, "I think I would rather go to the Fifth Marine Division at Camp Pendleton [California] and be an officer in a more peace-time setting than try to become a platoon commander under the fire of combat." It made sense to me. He said, "You can't go to language school." I am going to the Fifth Marine

Division. You may recall the big battle, the big Khe Sanh battle. It was [the battles on the hills] 881 [and] 681. There were two mountains around Khe Sanh that had major battles in the spring of 1967 and a lot of casualties. Those of us going to the Fifth Marine Division had our orders modified. We didn't go to Camp Pendleton. We didn't pass go or get \$200.00. We went right to Vietnam. I knew a Major Flynn. He was a funny [fellow]. I said, "This is great, Major." He said, "Oh, you just get into battle sooner." I said, "It isn't what I had in mind."

So I went home. Another fellow and I drove home together in his van, four hours on, four hours off all the way across country. I [was] home. I spent about a month before my parents drove me to Travis Air Force Base [Fairfield, California] and flew over to Okinawa [Japan] through Honolulu [Hawaii], Wake Island and then Okinawa on Braniff Air Lines. It was painted green. I figured that if we go down in the jungle we will be safe. [Laughter]

RB: [Laughter] They won't notice this big airliner!

EB: I was a nervous wreck. I was wearing what they call summer service Charlies, short sleeved. I perspired so much, just nervous energy. Plus, I was sitting in the middle. Then from Honolulu to Wake I got to sit near the window. I sat on the outside and then I sat near the window from Wake to Okinawa. I remember flying over looking down our right. I said, "Hey that is Mount Suribachi." It was. We were flying over Iwo Jima.

RB: Had you ever been out of the country before?

EB: [I had] been to Tijuana, Mexico. I stopped in Hawaii in 1967. I just spent an hour there to refuel and check our legs.

RB: When you got to Vietnam, what was your first impression [of] being there?

EB: We spent a week being processed to Okinawa. Of course, I ran every day to keep myself piped up. We flew to Vietnam on Continental Airlines. I thought: when we got off the airplane we were going to be running to bunkers because of incoming mortars. It was blue sky and people just walking around in t-shirts. The things that I knew, it was different. You smell human feces because they fertilize everything, all their rice paddies. It permeates. It is so hot and muggy. It just permeates the air.

RB: When did you arrive there?

EB: [In] July of 1967.

RB: Where did you arrive?

EB: [In] Da Nang [Vietnam]. We were assigned the first day or two to the First Marine Division. Some [fellows] went up to the Third Marine Division nearer the DMZ [Demilitarized Zone]. Once you go to Division S-1 they assign you to a regiment. I was assigned to the Fifth Marine Regiment. I didn't understand who they were, but except those marines are great to be with. They do a lot of fighting. [Laughter].

BF: [Laughter]

RB: That is great! [Laughter]

EB: The Fifth Marine Regiment, the Sixth Marine Regiment and the Fourth Marine Brigade made a name for themselves at Belleau Wood in World War I when the Germans were sixty miles from Paris [France]. Everybody was going the other direction and the Marines were just moving out to the battlefield. This French general said, "Colonel, you are going the wrong way. We are retreating." He said, "Retreat, hell. We just got here." So the Marines fought at Belleau Wood and took terrible casualties. But the Germans were so impressed by the ferocity of the Marines that they called them devil dogs. "Teufel Hunde" in German. It saved Paris and the French awarded the Marine Corps, the Fifth Marine Regiment, the Sixth Marine Regiment and the Fourth Marine Brigade the Croix de Guerre. So if you are in the regiment you wear the green pony rope [silk chord]. They renamed it the Burning of Woods.

RB: From that battle experience of World War I.

EB: The casualties were just horrific. You would not tolerate those kinds of casualties anymore.

RB: You stayed in Da Nang?

EB: We were assigned to the Fifth Marine Regiment. I remember meeting with Colonel Davis, three other lieutenants and I. I said, "Who is this turkey?" He said, "Six months from now half of you will be dead or relieved." I said, "This is a happy [fellow]. Can you motivate me any better?" From the Fifth Marine Regiment you are assigned to either the first, second or third battalion. I went to the Third Battalion, Fifth Marines.

RB: Where was that located?

EB: We were out at the time on Hill 63. Actually we went out to Hill 29 which was providing security for our artillery battery, the 155 Battery. Then we provided security along Route 1 because the Viet Cong-North Vietnamese had blown bridges. We had to put in temporary bridges to keep traffic moving on Route 1 and provide security. We had to patrol north from where we were up to Tam Ky and down to Chu Lai. No, that was from Tam Ky to Hoi An.

RB: Was your job to provide security?

EB: Security.

RB: What kind of weapons did you have?

EB: That is another mistake the Marine Corps made. We were trained with the M-14. We were wed to that weapon. We could take it apart and put it together, blindfolded, in less than a minute. If something didn't function properly you knew what to do. We went through an hour of familiarization, before we went over, with the M-16. We got to Vietnam and they pass out M-16s. When the [Third Battalion, Fifth Marine Regiment] first got the M-16 they didn't have cleaning rods or cleaning gear for them. The Marine Corps also bought the M-16 E-1 Model [experimental]. The Army turned it down and accepted the A-1 Model which had all the bugs worked out of it. We had a real problem with those [weapons] jamming. Tolerances were so critical. The buffer spring was too strong. The bolt would rust a little bit, get a little corrosion and it wouldn't function. We weren't as wed to that weapon as we were the M-14.

BF: Did you ever have to pick up enemy arms from the battlefield? I know every five shots the M-16 would jam on the line. I know they would often pick up type 56s and all that.

EB: You can say all you want about the Russian AK-47. It certainly is not as well made as ours, but it does one thing. It functions. It works. You can put it in mud, rinse it off and it will function.

RB: Is that what the Viet Cong were using?

EB: They used the AK-47. The AK-47 has a very distinctive sound to it. When you hear it you go, "Oh."

RB: You know who is firing it.

EB: They also used the SKS [Soviet Semi-automatic carbine rifle] 43 which was five or six rounds.

BF: It was ten round magazines.

RB: You [arrived] there in July and you were performing security duty.

EB: Then we went up on a bridge during the elections in late August or early September. They were having elections in Vietnam. We went on a show of force, which was just a walk in the sun, just to show we could kind of go where we wanted to go. Ran security on tanks, taking tanks up from Hill Point 29 up to Hill 63 the first tank company. On September 3 we were having an operation to the

east of our position which was an infiltration route that the Viet Cong used. It was a sand area from the South China Sea. It was a small fire fight, one Marine wounded. We [were] out into a big sand area and we come under fire. It was a pretty good fire, too. We brought in some Air Force planes. They don't fly as low as the Marine corps does. They use CBUs [cluster bomb unit] which are better. Do you know what CBUs are?

RB: No.

EB: They are little bomblets. You drop a big bomb and it blows boom, boom, boom, boom. It is like 100 hand grenades going off. There was a lot of activity out there so we planned the next day to go a two-day operation with Kilo Company. The battalion chaplain said, "Can I go with you?" "Sure." I didn't say that, but he was allowed to go on this two-day operation. The early morning we were all getting some sleep or trying to and we were awakened with a lot of activity. It turns out that Bravo and Delta Company, first battalion, fifth marines out in the Que Son Valley had been overrun by a large force of North Vietnamese, thirty-five killed, eighty-five wounded, [from] two companies. That is a lot of casualties. The battalion commanders of 1-5 [1st Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment] asked for some help. So Kilo and Mike were put under the operational control of the 1-5. Late morning we flew off by helicopter. We cleaned our weapons. CH46 [Boeing Verto CH-46 Sea Knight helicopter] comes in the sand area. Sand blowing. You can see how clean our weapons would be.

RB: [Laughter]

EB: Kilo flies out first and they take some rounds incoming when they land. So when we were taken out we were put about 1,500 meters away from where Kilo landed. The pilots didn't want to go into a hot LZ [landing zone]. My company commander had been a mustang, had been on a one year tour and been promised a company. [He] was given a company when my company commander Captain Fregalo was relieved suspiciously. My platoon sergeant said, "I think I know where you are. Okay. I can see the towers." There were two Buddhist towers. So I said, "Sgt. Marbury thinks we are here." "No, we are here." You couldn't argue with him. I have more respect for him because he knew what he was doing. So we moved in the wrong direction for about an hour. Finally, we stopped for lunch, some C-rations. He put a white phosphorous shell on our objective. What is over here? Not this way. So we start moving in that direction. It may have saved our lives because Marines love to follow roads. We were not on a road. We were going off road.

I do remember the first platoon had the point, I had the right flank, the third platoon had the left flank. We had a pretty narrow bridge. Third platoon gets a couple of sniper rounds. I remember our company commander said, "White Axel, this is six. Go teach that young man a lesson." I remember taking notes at basic school that you don't chase snipers when you are dealing with the North

Vietnamese. They use it to pull you into ambushes. Ten seconds later pop, pop, brrrr, brrrr, automatic weapons. Oh, God! The conversation [was] a little more animated on the radio. He wanted some support. So I took my platoon out to his right flank on this knoll looking into a tree line. I was ordered to take my platoon around the knoll and envelop the tree line. I said, "Aye, aye sir."

Big mistake. I should have said wait one and got up to see what I am giving my agreement to. I asked my first squad leader, Larry Peters who was a sergeant, to lead his squad as we go around this knoll and into the tree line. They caught me fifteen or twenty yards and all hell broke loose because the NVA [North Vietnamese Army] were all over the back side of the hill in what they call a reverse slope ambush. They were camouflaged as bushes. It turns out we were engaged by a very large force of North Vietnamese. My radio man pulled me back into a hole and Peters from my other squad had to fight their way back up the hill to get some protection. We had quite a few killed. While we were in this fight position I looked behind me and I saw somebody running out in a crouch position. He jumps into my hole. It is the battalion chaplain, Father Capadano. He starts to crawl out and I pull him back by his pack. He was giving last rites and helping the dying. He was killed. He was later awarded the Medal of Honor. I had a [hospital] corpsman, Doc Liel, who received] the Navy Cross. Sgt. Manford was wounded five times and [received] the Navy Cross. Larry Peters [received] the Medal of Honor. [Lawrence D. Peters, September 16, 1946 – September 4, 1967.]

RB: What was the chaplain's name?

EB: Father Vincent Capadano.

RB: How did you get through that experience?

EB: [Emotional] I was probably stupid and naïve to understand how bad we were. One thing that popped into my head was a comment that Coach [John] McKay had made in a team meeting about boys. "You better study hard because if you don't you will get drafted in the service and go to Vietnam. You go to Vietnam there are no half times, you can't call time out, there are no orange slices, there are no cokes, you can't call a trainer out."

BF: [Laughter]

RB: [Laughter]

EB: I am looking at all these bodies coming. It goes in slow motion. This is the ultimate ball game. If you lose here you are dead. It never crossed my mind that we were going to get hit. We should have been overrun. We should have been overrun. But we had a bird dog [Cessna O-1 Bird Dog observation aircraft] flying over us. A flight is two airplanes. We had ten flights of birds stacked up to 10,000 feet. The bird that [was] called in next was the plane with the lowest fuel load,

low on fuel. I have never seen a show like this in my life. The NVA had Quad 50s [Four M2 .50 caliber machine guns] on free hill masses, F-4s, A-4s, A-6s coming in. Tracers would be going up, ricocheting off the fuselage and not one plane got back. One, actually, had to bail out over the South China Sea. I had dinner with the NVA who we fought in 2004.

RB: You went back to Vietnam?

EB: Yes, twice. I said, "Colonel Chin, how many men did you have in that battle? 800? 1,100? 1,200?" He said, "We had 4,000 men."

RB: How many were you numbered?

EB: [We had] 186. It wasn't my time.

RB: By all accounts, odds, you should have been overrun.

EB: Exactly. I said, "You could have been overrun." He said, "Your Air Force was killing us."

RB: That was the saving grace.

EB: The marine air saved us.

RB: Did you retreat from that?

EB: No, they retreated.

RB: Wow!

EB: We were down to about one magazine, one grenade, per man. We started with maybe ten or twelve. The [fellows] up front always carried more than I did as an officer. We had puff the magic dragon. It was an Air Force C-119 [Fairchild C-119 Flying Boxcar] with a galley gun. Now, they have C-130s [Lockheed C-130 Hercules] with about two or three coming out. Somebody held a strobe up in the middle of our position and they were putting rounds about fifty feet in front of us all night long. Next morning there was a small trench fifty feet in front of our position. Fifty dead North Vietnamese inside that trench. Everybody else was gone. They took care of everybody. They policed the battlefield.

RB: Incredible! Did the fighting go on through the night?

EB: It broke contact about ten o'clock —

RB: — and then they were gone.

EB: The other people I had incredible respect for were these army warrant officer helicopter pilots. These [fellows] are nineteen years old. They don't know what they should be concerned about it. You would have one [fellow] come in with a neon light and he is down low and is just checking things out trying to draw fire. Above him are three gunships. So the poor [fellow] who is down at the bottom trying to draw fire is the bait.

RB: It takes a lot of courage.

EB: It really does. The difference between the Marine and Navy pilots is they are all officers which means they have all gone to college, they are married. These [fellows] are just out of high school. They are nineteen years old. They don't know that they should be scared.

RB: That is what I was thinking.

EB: I learned a few lessons coming out of sports. Being big, strong, fast, tough were the deciding factors. There were Marines who were 120 pounds soaking wet. They had more courage than I have ever seen in my life.

BF: Really?

EB: Oh, yes!

BF: Did you learn very quickly or did they tell you when you got off at Da Nang to take your stripes off?

EB: No, I never — I was a survivor.

BF: You didn't want to get your butt shot off.

EB: No. You don't walk next to your radio man either.

BF: A good idea.

EB: Get ten feet behind me. I will come to you.

BF: Did you have a "Squid" [Navy sailors] attached to your squad or a couple of them?

EB: We had two corpsman.

BF: It used to be they would have a "Squid" attached or every squad.

EB: It is two per platoon. It may be one corpsman now.

EB: We had guns and rockets attached. So I had fifty-five men under my command. A squad should be ten men.

BF: Ten to fifteen [men].

EB: Now it's fifteen — three fire teams and a squad leader. A squad leader carried an M-79 [grenade launcher] usually [would] have a grenadier. They let the squad leader carry it because we were not to TO [table of organization].

RB: The TET Offensive [series of surprise attacks by the Vietcong] was in February 1968. Tell about that.

EB: We took so many casualties on SWIFT [Operation Swift was a 1st Marine Division operation to rescue two Marine Companies in September 1967 in the Que Son Valley]. It became Operation SWIFT. [In] my platoon I had fifteen [men] killed and twelve [men] wounded in that one day.

RB: The one you just described?

EB: Yes. My platoon took the brunt of the casualties because the North Vietnamese tried to come to my platoon.

RB: How many [men] are in a platoon?

EB: I had fifty-five [men]. Take out twenty-seven [men].

RB: [Lost] fifty percent or so. Did you have to regroup after that?

EB: We had the next day to kind of lick our [wounds]. The big sobering thing was for me to say goodbye to my [youngsters], and they were [youngsters]. They were lying in their ponchos on the fifth of September. The fourth of September was Labor Day. I was thinking: gee, I was playing football a few years ago on this date. Quite a change. I walked down the line full of ponchos at their feet to say goodbye to them. [He was emotional and reflective.]

RB: Sobering.

EB: It was very humbling, probably the worst day of my life.

RB: Did you ever think: why them and not me?

EB: I went out by myself and cried. You didn't want to do it in front [of your troops]. They were all real good [youngsters], great [youngsters]. Larry Peters who was awarded the Medal of Honor was a great [fellow]. I liked him a lot — smart [fellow]. He turned down a chance to go to Columbia University [New York] and went into the Marine Corps. You wonder [about] the fickle finger of fate. Why do some people die and some people do not? When I was in this fighting hole with

my radio man one of my squad leaders had dropped his gas mask. They came in with [Hueys [Bell UH-1 Iroquis] and dropped CS [a form of tear gas]. The North Vietnamese would break contact and they were ready to overrun us. They brought tear gas in, CS gas, and their tactics were to break contact. They didn't carry gas masks. A lot of my [men] would drop their gas masks. One of my squad leaders came running back. He was lying next to me. So he was in the middle over here, here and Corporal Frensi. Then we had two F-8s [Vought F-8 Crusader] and they were carrying 2,000 pound bombs. The bird dogs spotted a large force, probably a regiment. They had us like this, [gesturing with hands to show how they were surrounded] near a Marine regiment and swept through us. They were basically just flying in formation across a big rice paddy and they brought these 2,000 pound bombs in. With their big bombs [gesturing an explosion] and, of course the ground shook and you hear all the people and pieces of men [flying all over].

[END OF RECORDING ONE.]

EB: [Another came in and] it hit the [fellow] next to me. It put a big gash [in him]. I said why him and not me. When I came home from Vietnam, surviving it, I made a vow that I owed it to them to live my life as best I could, [to] make the most out of it. They could have done a lot of very great things.

RB: Their life was cut short at that point, but the future for them — I think about that when someone dies young — could have been filled with so many things: children, careers, education, happy times and it ended on that day in September of 1967.

EB: My son ["JP"] was killed on Veterans Day 2004. [Emotional] You do think about that. You think about the fact that they will never get married, have a family. You also think on the other side, my favorite poet is A. E. Housman. Do you know who Housman is? He [wrote] a famous poem called *To the Athlete Dying Young*. "*You will never lose a race. Your records will never be broken.*" I remember the first Friday night on November 12th. A friend of mine who worked for NBC [National Broadcasting Company] News, he and his wife were there. Kay said, "What do you think about "JP's" death?" I said, "I am devastated." I also think about the fact that he will never get old. He will never have major setbacks. He will never have unhappy things happen in his life. You carry them on your shoulders when they win the race, but then they die. CNN [Cable News Network] came to our house on his two-year anniversary to interview Pam and me. My daughter [Christina Blecksmith] said, "When I am [seventy-five years "JP" will still be twenty-four [years old]." [Emotional]

RB: Right, forever twenty-four.

EB: Always twenty-four. Great [fellow], too.

RB: I can imagine.

EB: About six [feet] four [inches], 220 [pounds]. Great athlete. Great leader. I remember going to a Change of Command at Camp Pendleton. A three-star general, I forgot John's last name, but was the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force commander when "JP" was killed. He [sent a handwritten letter to us. He said, "I never knew your son, but I heard so much about him." After the Change of Command ceremony concluded I walked over to him. I said, "General, I want to thank you for the very kind letter you sent when "JP" was killed." He said, "Mr. Blecksmith, your son was a warrior. I know that for you and your wife it is a terrible loss, but losing him is a terrible loss to the Marine Corps because he was one of our future leaders." [Emotional]

RB: That is quite an honor to him.

EB: It is. It is the old "It is better to be looked over than overlooked" [Mae West]. It is those kind of reactions that, well, I guess I did something right.

BF: He was a part of one of the Marine Corps' defining moments and he will probably forever be enshrined in Marine Corps history. Just like those boys who rose the flag on Iwo Jima and those boys who escaped from —.

EB: Losing Fallujah [Iraq] was a big battle. It should never have been fought. The first assault on Fallujah, in the spring of 2004, should have never stopped. It was a big mistake to stop it.

BF: It is what it is.

EB: I was now one of two officers in the company. Ed Combs [Lieutenant, 1st Platoon, 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines] had been shot in the back. He was going to be a hotshot and carry a shotgun until he fired it. All he did was attract fire. [Laughter]

RB: [Laughter]

BF: [Laughter]

EB: He was hit in the back with a .50 caliber machine gun round. His chest was laid open. He survived. We are still good friends. Randy Cernick [3rd Platoon, 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines] was the third platoon commander. On September 6th we were now in battalion reserve because we were down to about ninety-five people. India and Kilo step in it. They were about 600 meters across a big open rice paddy. By about ten o'clock that night [Lieutenant Colonel [William K. Rocky], our battalion commander, committed us against the wishes of the regimental commander. It cost him his command. He was relieved. "Hey, I am in charge out here. You are not here. I need to protect — I have enough battalion stature. All the people that are fighting are over there."

We went across these wide open rice paddies and there was 600 meters waist deep of water all around. Flares are coming down. You could see us silhouetted across the water. The North Vietnamese had captured one of our radios.

RB: They could hear what was going on?

EB: They are talking to us. It is out of a World War II movie. “Mike Company, we know you are coming.” [Gesturing with his head as if to be looking around.] Where am I going to die when I am going under water, if they open fire? We got across. Randy [Cernick] did a great job getting us across. He takes a concussion grenade in his stomach, loses his gall bladder. We get in the perimeter with India and Kilo [companies]. Next day they have a lot of KIAs [killed in action] lying around [on] September 6th. It was the eighth or ninth of September when I [received] my first wound. We had gone out just looking for graves. You could smell the death in the heat. Bodies when they are decomposing really smell like death.

RB: A [very] distinctive smell?

EB: It is not a real pleasant smell. We had gone back up on a hill and a young marine, probably twenty or thirty feet from me, hit a trip wire and set off a booby trap illumination grenade. I was standing right next to a bomblet. Instead of blowing up, it blew the rusted primer cap out. I still have it at home. If that thing had gone off I wouldn’t be here right now. I took shrapnel to the side of my face, [and] my right leg. His leg was split open from the explosion on his calf.

That was my first Purple Heart and I was out of the field for a while. I had two weeks in the hospital. Then I had to go back out and had to rebuild the company. [Lieutenant Jack] Murray [the company commander] rotated out and John [B. Fretwell] became the [Mike] company commander. He should never have been a company commander. He was a smart [fellow]. His father was a senior officer in the Marine Corps, so he was a legacy. Not similar as [John] McCain, but he was a Rhodes Scholar, — very smart. I think he was also a lawyer, but he should not have been a company commander.

RB: Why is that?

EB: He was terrible under fire.

RB: [He] didn’t make good judgments?

EB: He just choked. In November we had Operation Essex out in the Antenna Valley — the same kind of situation. We were supposed to assault a fortified building with one company and all the channels — they had us channeled. I said, “Six, this is too actual. Pull back and get to a defensive position.” The first platoon had been

the point. They had two people on point get shot. So they were lying in a rice paddy. The North Vietnamese were using them as bait to bring us in. I told one of my squad leaders, [Corporal] Keith Roundseville, "Go down this hedge row." He kind of blanched. I said, "I know. I'll be right with you. I'll be with your squad." We [were] maybe ten feet up and saw all the little bodies running, going around us. I said, "This is six, this is too actual. This place is going to be untenable. Pull back." All of a sudden it just erupted. He is on the phone. "It was too actual, this is six. It is untenable." I pulled my people back. We got across a shallow river, up on terraces and got people into an area that was defensible. I spent the night on a trail with five other people. The company command group in the first platoon [was] whacked pretty badly. They were the base of fire. The second platoon and third platoon would go in the village. They had this place barbed wired through all the bamboo. They had fighting positions dug in. They were ready for [us].

RB: They were ready for you. Was that in November?

EB: [In] November 1967 [I received my] second wound that night. Then we were caught by the TET Offensive. Because we had so many casualties we had moved up to an area just about eight miles south of Da Nang, near Hoi An. We went out on security patrols and start [to] having a lot more contact. It wasn't just Viet Cong. It was North Vietnamese, too. So we knew something was going on. And the TET Offensive happened.

RB: What was your experience with that?

EB: It wasn't good. [Laughter] We had taken so many casualties. We were down to fifteen [men] in a platoon. Fifteen [men] in a platoon is a squad.

RB: From fifty-five [men] or so to fifteen [men].

EB: That is not a real fighting unit. One of the big mistakes of the Vietnam War was rotating people in and out all the time. You never had any unit cohesion because of it. Units should train together, get to know each other [and] know how to function together. That didn't happen.

I know [Joseph] "Joe" [Francis] Dunford, [Jr.] [very] well. "Joe" Dunford is chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. [He was nominated by President Barack Obama in 2015 and again by President Donald Trump in 2017.] He was picked to be regimental commander. He brought "JP" into his regiment back in 2004. I remember telling him, "'Joe,' I think 'JP' was a much better officer than I was." "Well, what do you mean?" I said, "I had a gun at my head. Either you join the Marine Corps or you are drafted in the Army. What is the choice? Everybody in the service right now are all volunteers. 'JP' was much better motivated. He was a better leader, better trained than I was. He had two weeks at Twenty Nine Palms [California] in live fire. We never had that. It was all OJT, on the job training. It may not work for you. Another thing, when I went to Vietnam I had two goals:

survive and come home. “JP”’s two goals were: lead my men effectively in combat and bring them all home alive.”

RB: It is a whole different mindset. When did you come back?

EB: I [received] my third wound in March or late February 1968. I rotated back to Okinawa. I remember when I left I basically had tears in my eyes. I was happy to get out alive. You become very fatalistic. I didn’t [receive] nor did I seek any kind of decorations or awards. For me coming home alive was the best award I could get.

RB: With what you experienced, did you personally ever experience PTSD [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder] as we call it now? I don’t know if they called it shell shock or what [back] then.

EB: When I have been under a lot of stress, even after many years afterwards, I would have problems. I became much more reactionary. I remember one night living in BOQ [Bachelor Officer Quarters] at the air station. I had a nice little suite and had a refrigerator in my bedroom. I wake up and I was half asleep. I see this image. I thought someone was in my room. I got out of bed [very] quietly and attacked it. [It was] my refrigerator. Things like that. I remember reading a book by Jim Webb called *Fields of Fire*, about the Seventh Marines. He did a great job writing a book because it brought back a lot of memories that I would like to forget. Anybody who says you are not frightened in combat is either a liar or sick.

RB: What you are describing — I have observed a couple of things. One: you are going back in the moment and describing being in the middle of combat. The other aspect is when you said you pulled back the poncho to say goodbye to your men. These are two very emotional different types of [events], but [are] emotional events to the human mind and people deal with those differently. How did you cope with those [events]?

EB: First of all, I was twenty-four [years old]. I had been through five years of college football. I had been yelled at. I had been [under] a lot of pressure. I tell people if you are eighteen or nineteen years old and you grow up with combat as your teacher, it is a bad experience. A lot of things go bad [that] you will deal with as well. You cannot be in combat and not have it [PSTD] affect you. It is a given. Some people deal with it better than others. Most of the [fellows] that I know, that I served with, probably had some issues, but they have handled it okay. No one [went] postal. You know what that term means? I think it has [become] better. I think I told you on Saturday that I wish I had gone in the Marine Corps before I played football. I would have been a lot more assertive as a football player if I had had that experience, a [little] more mature. I had an assistant coach whom I despised because he was just somebody I couldn’t respect though you could respect because he was a tough [fellow]. I remember when I [was discharged from] the Marine Corps and I was back in graduate school. Coach McKay asked

me if I wanted to coach the freshmen. He saw me one day and he said; ““Eddie,” let’s go back to Vietnam and I will be your platoon sergeant.” I said, “Marv,” I don’t think so. You are not smart enough.” [Laughter]

RB: [Laughter]

BF: [Laughter]

EB: I just didn’t respect him. I would never have said that as an undergraduate. I played at a time where the basic coaching technique was [Paul William] “Bear” Bryant. You coached until everyone is dead and the ones that survive get to play. He did it at Texas A&M [College Station, Texas] and at [the University of] Alabama [Tuscaloosa, Alabama]. It was a death march. I do remember spring football. It was twenty days of war and the [players] who were standing when it was over [were able] to play in the fall. I wanted to make sure I was standing. That is why if I had a 1:15 p. m. class and was not feeling real sharp I would take a nap and miss the class. I learned when I got to grad school, because I was paying my own tuition, if you read the book and go to class every time and take notes and listen you get a B [grade] — minimum. If you studied a little harder you would get an A [grade].

RB: [Laughter] Where as a freshman, undergraduate, you wouldn’t have that insight and perhaps didn’t even care. [Laughter]

EB: I hadn’t put things in the proper perspective. I may have told you, too, that after the spring game in 1964 when I made the varsity [team] and was starting, I had a really great spring game, two interceptions and some really great tackles. I only played the first half because they only played you long enough so as not to get you hurt. Ray George was one of our assistant coaches, a great [fellow]. I was having lunch with my parents. He walked by and said, ““Eddie,” if you studied as hard as you play football you would be a straight A student.” Mom said, “I told you.” That is why I wrote her that note that I am going to get an MBA [Master of Business Administration degree] when I get out of the Marine Corps. She had to pick herself up off the floor!

RB: [Laughter] She knew and understood. It took you going through this to figure it out on your own. You came back [to the states] in 1968.

EB: I rotated back. I went back to Quantico, Virginia. I was assigned to play football which was a mistake. I tried to sign up for football before Vietnam and it didn’t help me. Then I was assigned to play football when I came home. Once you have been gone for two years, when you have gone through combat experience, sacrificing your body any longer was not something I wanted to do. I didn’t enjoy it. Also it developed a condition called synostosis.

I sprained my ankle as a senior in high school. The sprain caused a little bit of calcium to develop. In time, the calcium grew across and bridged two bones in the left ankle. If I ran a lot I couldn't flex my foot. They had to do surgery on it in January 1969 at the Naval Hospital at Quantico. It has been fine ever since. Because of having surgery I couldn't go out to basic school and become a staff platoon commander. So I was assigned to the command staff college as assistant plans and support officer and the aide to the director. Now that was terrific because when I came back from Vietnam, like most people, there was a certain bitterness in our mouth. The way the war was being prosecuted, there was no real mission for us there. I always thought that [Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara] just wanted us to be there. We weren't there to defeat the North Vietnamese [we were just to] have a presence and be there. We are here.

RB: Don't lose to the communists.

EB: We didn't care.

RB: I think that was part of the philosophy politically.

EB: There was a concern of the domino effect.

RB: That was the theory.

EB: There was some validity to it. I have a theory, the fact that we stayed in Vietnam for ten years and the Soviet Union was underwriting their North Vietnamese puppets, financially and economically they couldn't do it. We exacerbated their financial problems.

RB: It was kind of expensive for us, but it had a silver lining, I guess. I never heard of that theory before. That is very true. We wore them down as much as —.

EB: It cost a lot of money. The North Vietnamese sent a lot of their own people to the Soviet Union to use them as slave laborers and help pay off their debt.

RB: Pay back! [Laughter]

EB: I took Jane [Blecksmith, my wife] back to Vietnam in 2012 on a Silver Seas Cruise. We went to Hai Phong City. We had been to Hanoi so I didn't want to take that nine hours bus trip. The north has been communist a lot longer than the south. People in the south loved us. Friendly, outgoing. When they heard I had been in the Marine Corps they came over and thanked me for it. "Thank you for trying to save our country." Half of Vietnam right now would still support you being there. When you get to Hai Phong it has been communist from the outset. We were there for four hours. I never saw one person smile, not one. Everybody is suspicious, not a warm fuzzy place.

RB: [Laughter] We are going to need to leave. I think they are closing up here at 5:00 p.m. We will go ahead and close right now.

[END OF RECORDING TWO.]

[RECORDING THREE BLANK.]

RB: This is October 22, 2018. This is Part II of our interview with [Edward] “Ed” Blecksmith about his experience in Vietnam — prior to and post-Vietnam period. [The] last time we were talking about your third injury in the TET Offensive. Can you recollect anything that happened with regard to that injury?

EB: It was minor. I said, ““Doc,” is this a wound?” He said, “Yes.” So I said, “Okay.”

RB: What was the injury?

EB: [I received] shrapnel from a mortar.

RB: Into your leg?

EB: Actually, in the hand.

RB: How did you come in contact with the mortar?

EB: There were a lot of North Vietnamese running around our area. That was the big change in our operations.

RB: What was the area again?

EB: We were about eight miles south of Da Nang — between Da Nang and Hoi An.

RB: What I understand about the TET Offensive was that the North Vietnamese had actually been planning that for some time. Normally, that was going to be a cease fire period. It was one of the biggest holidays in Vietnam.

EB: I think it is the biggest holiday, their New Year.

RB: It is their New Year. In 1968 it was far from a truce for a stand down at all.

EB: All the families [were] back together to celebrate the TET. The North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong thought that they would catch everybody relaxed and that there would be a massive national uprising in support of their effort and there wasn't.

RB: So in that respect, the North Vietnamese effort was a failure.

EB: Except in the views of Walter Cronkite. Walter Cronkite said there is no way we can win this war. When [President] Lyndon [B.] Johnson heard that he threw up his hands and said, “This war can’t be won because Walter Cronkite said it couldn’t be.”

RB: Did Walter Cronkite come after the Offensive?

EB: I think it was about the same time. It had some duration because of [Siege of] Hue. Hue was about two or three weeks past the start of the Offensive. In point of fact, the Viet Cong exposed all their network so it was pretty much taken out. That may have been by design because the North Vietnamese didn’t really respect the Viet Cong because they weren’t part of the North Vietnamese group. As a matter of fact, both our and Viet Cong cemeteries in the south have been remade back and put into North Vietnamese hands.

RB: Is that right?

EB: Yes. The North Vietnamese thought they would have another “Dien Bien Phu.” [Famous victory for the North Vietnamese against the French in 1954.] There were about a 100,000 North Vietnamese [who] died in Que San. It was huge. They died of disease. They died [from] B-52 raids around the area. We call those arc lights because when you see them the light arcing off in the distance, they were doing a bombing run. At Dien Bien Phu the French didn’t have air power. The North Vietnamese built these trenches and just kept moving them forward toward the French positions. They tried that with us, too. We put [seismic] intrusion devices, SIDs [Seismic Sensors used by the Marines in Vietnam which responded to small ground vibrations such as human footsteps], all over the area. They would pick up movement. They would bring in an arc light. I heard General [Earle Gilmore] Wheeler speak at a Command Staff and College [Marine Corps University] where I went to work after I returned back to Quantico in 1969. [He] said that there were a lot of dead North Vietnamese in the trench line. They had been concussed to death by the bombing. It was pretty severe.

RB: The casualties of the North Vietnamese were great during the TET, but the common understanding over here, on this side of the ocean, was that they were able to get into the American Embassy and we were not doing so [well] if the North could do that. What little I know about the TET was that the actual understanding of it wasn’t really made available to the American people.

EB: The media was against it. When I went back to graduate school after leaving the Marine Corps, I [became] involved in campus politics. It was fun. Heretofore, I had been playing football. I didn’t really get involved in [events] on campus. I had some pretty good debates with the anti-war students on campus. I became friends with a couple of them. I remember asking one of them — they were putting out the People’s Peace Treaty. I said, “Have you ever wondered why your peace treaty is identical to the Viet Cong peace treaty?” And it was. It was the same verbiage. It

was an interesting time. I [was able] to grow a moustache, let my hair get longer and wear bell bottom trousers.

RB: [Did] you get the shrapnel [wound] and [then] were sent to Okinawa?

EB: To finish out my overseas tour.

RB: How long were you there?

EB: From the middle of March until the first of July [1968].

RB: Obviously, you recovered from your wound.

EB: Yes.

RB: Have you had any long term effects [from] injuries in Vietnam?

EB: No, I was lucky. People would say you were wounded. I would say my wound is a cheap wound. Some [fellows] paid a lot for theirs.

RB: Did you get any medals?

EB: [I received] two Purple Hearts.

RB: For the benefit of the transcriptionist and those listening, the Purple Heart is given if you were injured in combat. But you had three injuries? Why didn't you get three?

EB: The first [award] was from a booby trap, illumination grenade.

RB: Did you get one for that?

EB: Yes. A young marine set it off and he took a lot of pepper shrapnel on the face and the right thigh. This split his calf open from the explosion. The second [award] was received in November, [in] Operation Essex. We were surrounded by North Vietnamese and, actually, in pretty desperate straits.

RB: You discussed that in your last interview.

EB: That was [Operation] SWIFT. It really was desperate. I didn't realize it. [Operation] Essex on November 8, [1967 [and] we had tried to make an assault on a village that was fortified. It was late [and] dark. It was a bad time to do an assault.

RB: Did you [receive] a Purple Heart for that?

EB: Yes.

RB: Did you [receive] a Purple Heart from the TET [Offensive]?

EB: No. They thought if I didn't [receive] a Purple Heart I wouldn't leave the country either. The rules were if you have a wound of any time duration, if you [receive] three of them you are out of the country.

RB: So you went to Okinawa and your twelve-month tour was up in July [1968].

EB: The Marine Corps is thirteen [months], but I came home early. I had a great time in Okinawa.

RB: What did you do there?

EB: I learned how to scuba dive, which was really a lot of fun because it is beautiful water. It is just as clear as a bell. It was good training. I also had a friend over at the Futenna Air Station [Marine Corps Air Station, Futenna, Ginowan, Okinawa, Japan]. We became friends. He called and said, "Do you want to go flying this afternoon?" I said, "Yes. Are you going up to the training area?" He was flying a CH-34 [piston engine military helicopter] which is the old Sikorsky, like a guppie. He would train. I got to sit in this helicopter strapped to the door and take pictures with my Nikon camera.

RB: So you finished up there.

EB: I [received] orders to Quantico. I went home for about a month and then back to Quantico. I was assigned to play football which was a mistake. I wish I hadn't done it.

RB: When you say football, you played for the Quantico Marines. Were there other teams in the Marines that you played?

EB: It was more of a recruiting tool to go out and play Xavier [University, Cincinnati, Ohio] or go to Presbyterian [College, Clinton, South Carolina].

RB: You played college teams?

EB: Yes.

RB: Why was it a mistake for you?

EB: It is tough to go back and play a game after two years. I think I was tired of sacrificing my body.

RB: What position did you play?

EB: I played safety. At USC I played safety and wide receiver.

RB: You took a lot of hits in your football career.

EB: Actually, I was delivering the hits. I discovered it was more fun to give a hit than to take a hit.

BF: When you were involved with the campus politics, did you ever run into Vietnam Veterans Against the War? Or drill with them?

EB: There were some [who] were in law school. Actually, it was fun to go out and debate people.

RB: But that was later, right?

EB: That was after I [was discharged from] the Marine Corps.

RB: When [were] you [discharged from] the Marine Corps?

EB: [On] December 16, 1969. My last year in the Marine Corps was actually a wonderful experience. You asked what I thought about the war. I came home from Vietnam, like a lot of veterans did, embittered the way we were being prosecuted. I mean if you are going to fight a war, you fight to win it. If you are not going to win it, don't sacrifice bodies.

RB: Did you think that [General William Childs] Westmoreland was leading properly?

EB: I wasn't that respectful of LBJ [President Lyndon Baines Johnson]. I always said he is a great commander-in-chief and a lousy president because you couldn't talk badly about your commander-in-chief. When I went into [the] country they had me, as an officer, read the rules of engagement which basically said you couldn't shoot unless you were shot at. If the [fellow] is a good shot you may be dead before you could shoot him. Don't send your guys into combat and tie their hands behind their back. Over time you became a little more disrespectful of people who would sit in the rear and tell you how to operate in the field.

EB: I lost the sixteen Marines on —

EB: — September 4 or 5, 1967. I lost probably two or three on [Operation] Essex because we were providing the initial assault into the village. They were [very] great [fellows]. They really were. Politicians get too much involved in war. If we fought World War II like we are asking our soldiers and marines to fight now, we would have lost. We would be speaking German right now or Japanese.

RB: Yes. What was your role at Quantico?

EB: I played football. I sprained an ankle in high school. It was a pretty bad sprain. It wiped out six or seven games. [I was] hobbling. Speed was one of my best strengths. I played five years at USC. Over time, that little piece of calcium had grown. By 1968 the calcium had expanded to two bones. It was like a goal post. I couldn't rotate. It was very uncomfortable. I was scheduled for surgery which meant I couldn't go out to the basic school and serve as a staff platoon commander. So I was assigned to the Command and Staff College [Marine Corps University] at the [education] center. I was an aide to the director and the assistant plans support officer. So I worked for a major and also worked for a colonel. It was a general's billet that he had, but they didn't have any generals to fill it. So he was a very senior colonel named Bob Berry, a great [fellow]. It turned out he went to the same high school my dad went to, Washington High School. He was an ace during World War II. [He had] six kills in night fighting. He was qualified as a night fighter. He was just a terrific [fellow]. I spent a lot of time up in his quarters just talking with him. I became very close to him.

RB: You finished up in December with your commitment. What did you do after that?

EB: My dad had come back to [tend to some] business. He took a train down to Quantico and we drove back together. It was a lot of fun together. I went down to [the University of Southern California] to enroll in school. I couldn't get into business school because [classes] didn't start until fall. So I took upper division undergraduate courses, eight units, of which could be used against my MBA.

RB: In essence you were able to start your program, though not officially, in the program.

EB: I really enjoyed it. I enjoyed school. I knew why I was there. I was paying my own tuition with savings I made in the Marine Corps.

RB: Get back to Brady's question. Your interaction with other students in 1969, and I guess into 1970, when you were still in the program. That was probably getting into the height of the anti-war movement in 1970. You came back having served. What were your thoughts about what other students were saying or feeling?

EB: I feel now as I felt then. They were prolonging the war by giving aid and comfort to the enemy. The North Vietnamese will have said that they were ready to drop, but they were encouraged by the support they were getting back at the United States and the fact that Johnson kept calling for bombing halts thinking they could get them to the table to negotiate. There was one North Vietnamese general who apparently had lost a lot of favor in the country. He was living in France ten or fifteen years ago. He said he couldn't understand why we stopped the bombing. We had them on the ropes and let them off time and time again.

RB: That was the Vietnamese General?

EB: North Vietnamese. General Vo Nguyen Giap who was the architect of Dien Bien Phu who wrote a book that said the Americans [had us beat]. Again, I don't know if they were well intentioned. I think they were, like someone said, useful idiots. They supported the North position, just like we have [the] left in the country, right now.

RB: Do you think that [President Richard M.] Nixon and his approach toward resolving the Vietnam conflict worked?

EB: The Vietnamization?

RB: Yes.

EB: He didn't have much choice. Yes, it did work. Even while I was in [the] country I always thought we would leave the South Vietnamese armies all of our surplus weapons from World War II. Well, the Vietnamese would be 120 pounds soaking wet and they are carrying a Browning automatic rifle [BAR] which is about twenty-five or thirty pounds. It is a heavy piece of gear. We ridiculed them for only operating near the road, Highway One. They didn't operate things too far off the road. I said, "How many Medevac Helicopters do they have?" They don't. They had cracker boxes, ambulances and they were close to the road.

We also went into Vietnam with kind of an arrogant attitude. We are the United States. Why don't you [fellows] just sit back and we will show you. We are going to do this. They sat back. Overall we lost 58,000 [troops] in ten years. They [the South Vietnamese] lost a lot more vis-à-vis their population. The North Vietnamese lost between from 800,000 to 1,200,000 [troops]. It was a big loss. When I went back to Vietnam in 2004 we spent several days in Hanoi, then flew down to the south, went to Da Nang and to Hue. I didn't see anybody my age.

RB: So they lost a whole generation?

EB: Probably.

RB: When you were there, [in 2004] there were younger people there who were not living at the time of the Vietnam War. Do they have much of a sense of history with regard to that?

EB: First of all, I don't think the history is being taught in schools.

RB: That is true.

EB: It is the old saying: If you don't know history you are bound to make the same mistakes. And, I think, we are. I always felt when I was in high school. I never [was] in fights. No one ever tried to pick on me. I was an athlete and pretty good

size. I didn't look for fights. I think if you are weak, people will see that weakness and they will pick on you. I think that is what has happened with this country. Every time we try to cut back, thinking the people we are competing with in the world will follow suit and do the same thing, they don't. Bullies respect power. The only way you deal with bullies is to punch them in the nose — otherwise they are going to keep victimizing you time and time again.

RB: One last question. When you were at USC you said you made some friends with those who were opposed to the war.

EB: I didn't hang out with them.

RB: You were civil.

EB: Sure. One of the administrators who I had gone to school with arranged a luncheon with one of the young people. His father was an IBM [International Business Machine] executive. So he was pretty well to do and a real campus radical. I went back to work for the [President] Nixon administration. I worked for [Herbert] "Herb" [George] Kline [Press Secretary and Communications Director for President Nixon]. I arranged for Herb and me, with our wives, to fly to Chicago [Illinois] and go to South Bend [Indiana] for the USC — Notre Dame game in 1971. I saw this young [fellow] there. He was going to school at Michigan getting a master's degree in sociology. We are still friendly. I haven't seen him since.

RB: You started your MBA program in fall of 1970. TET was in 1968. You finished up in December of 1969. So you spent a whole year and a half at Quantico?

EB: Yes.

RB: In fall of 1969 you went back to California and [in] fall of 1970 you started your MBA program. Was it a two-year program?

EB: Actually, if you had an undergraduate [degree] in business. It is a two-year program now — mandatory. At the time if you had no business background it was two years. If you had an undergraduate [degree] in business it was one year, which was one of the things that made it attractive.

RB: In 1970-1971 you completed that program. Then you worked for Herb Kline?

EB: During my time in the Marine Corps we had a suite at basic school. One of my suite mates was a [fellow] named Bill Bostrom who was raised in La Jolla, California. The cul-de-sac on which he lived there were two other families: Herb and Marge Klein and a [couple] named Tom and Marilyn Pownall. When we were at Quantico going to basic school we would go up to Pownall's maybe once a month and spend a weekend with them. They were terrific. He worked for

Convair in La Jolla when he [was] in Southern California. He was a senior vice president of marketing with a Martin Company.

RB: Lockheed Martin?

EB: Yes. He ultimately became chairman of the board of Martin Marietta. I really looked up to Tom. He had gone to the [United States] Naval Academy. He walked in a room and you knew he was there. A lot of things about him I really admired and respected. I [received] a call from Tom when I was in graduate school, actually just before I graduated. He said, "I was talking with Herb the other day. He has an opening on his staff and I recommended you for it." I [was able] to know the Kleins through the Pownalls.

RB: How do you spell Pownall?

EB: P-O-W-N-A-L-L.

RB: What was Herb Klein's position?

EB: Herb had been the editor of the *San Diego Union Tribune* [California]. He had been Nixon's press secretary when he was vice president. Actually, he was press secretary during the campaign. He did not want to deal with the media on a day to day basis. He thought it was important to take the message outside the beltway directly. So he became the director of communications for the executive branch, a new position. I worked for him as a staff assistant. It was very interesting work.

RB: You were in the communications section. You were a staff person, but that is the office that you worked in?

EB: Yes.

RB: What did you do?

EB: I traveled with him on occasion. I would draft correspondence for his signature or for the president. We would get articles for editorials that we thought were complimentary to the president and the president should respond to the writer. So we would do a draft. You learn how someone's style is. Nixon had a different kind of a style and Herb was a journalist. He was very crisp.

RB: How long did you work for Herb?

EB: I worked for Herb from July of 1971 until, I think, March or April of 1973 after the election. After the election he wanted to put the people who worked in the White House out into the bureaucracy. I had a business background. I went to the Department of Commerce right when Watergate broke. I was shunted off by myself in a suite of offices. There was nothing to do.

- RB: [Laughter] The Watergate break-in was in June of 1972, so by 1973 things started unraveling after the election.
- EB: People don't really understand Watergate. It was a three-bit burglary. Nixon won forty-nine of the fifty states against [George] McGovern. The democrats had to do something to undermine his mandate. They controlled both the House [of Representatives] and the Senate. Sam Irwin from North Carolina, an old country lawyer [who] had Interstate 85 built right past his house so he could get home easily. [Laughter]
- RB: [Laughter]
- BF: [Laughter]
- EB: It is amazing — all the pork! That was a sad time because we had had seen all the possibilities and the successes that Nixon had with Détente, China, domestic affairs, EPA [Environmental Protection Agency], the Clean Water Act [and] the Clean Air Act. Those were all Nixon's doing. I have gone back and reread some of his position papers. After the election they put out a book of his position papers. If we had followed a lot of the things he was trying to do we wouldn't have had the problems we had ten years or twelve years later.
- BF: Did you ever get to see [Harry Robbins] "Bob" Haldeman or all of those [people] who were involved in Watergate?
- EB: I knew John Erlichman. I played football against Todd Haldeman when he was at the University of Washington. John is a good [person]. So is Bob. I had three very good friends from [USC] who worked for him. They loved him. I ascertained that if my good friend, Bruce Kurlai, thought Bob Haldeman was a great [fellow], bright and a good boss, he probably was. As a matter of fact, after he had gone to Lompoc [California] he became one of my clients when I worked for Korn Ferry. He was a smart client. He really was very intuitive, very bright. He worked for David Murdock who owned Dole Pineapple and Lanai which is Gold Pineapple. He also owned a hotel division, Murdock Hotels. At that time, I was doing work in the hotel business which I really enjoyed.
- RB: So you left the Commerce department in 1973?
- EB: Yes. During the 1972 Olympics where the Israelis were kidnapped and murdered by the Palestinians, we also had a lot of faux pas committed by the US Olympic Committee. One of Nixon's partners in New York wrote a memo saying that this is an issue the president should get involved in and he might want to consider naming a commission to study the USOC [United States Olympic Committee] and Olympic or amateur sports in America. One of the [people who] worked on the White House personnel office was a friend of mine. We would sit down, jaw

about it, end up writing a response to it and then a position paper for the president to consider. Nixon was going to name a commission. Then he [had] phlebitis and Watergate was blowing up in his face. But ultimately [Gerald] “Jerry” [R.] Ford did convene it. I became the director of communications for the president’s commission on Olympic sports. It was a fifteen month commission and we resolved through Public Law 805 the problem with the USOC.

The primary problem was it was a horizontal [organization] as opposed to vertical. We changed it, so if you competed in, let’s say, track and field you were part of the track and field federation. AAU [Amateur Athletic Union] controlled seven of the twenty-nine Olympic sports. That became the rub with everybody else in the business. The NCAA [National Collegiate Athletic Association] was always at odds with the AAU. We did not take the AAU out of business, but we took them out of [the] business of running all the sports in America. So we had independent federations and better leadership [and] money. During our hearings we discovered how much money was spent by the Germans and other governments for their athletics. We moved them out of New York and moved them to Colorado.

RB: The Olympic committee?

EB: Yes. The Olympic Committee.

RB: Where were you working when you were working on the commission?

EB: We had offices in [Washington] DC. From a political standpoint, we had four members of congress and four members of the senate, two on the democrat side and two on the republican side in both groups. We had Rayford Johnson and a lot of interesting people, athletes, Howard K. Smith from ABC [American Broadcasting Company] News. He was a great [fellow] by the way, [and] LaMar Hunt, who was then owner of the Kansas City Chiefs. As a matter of fact, we had a three-day session just for the commission in DC. Howard K. Smith asked the question, what if we took \$.05, since all the professional teams in America are the beneficiaries of high school, college athletics? What if we took a penny or a nickel from each ticket to fund amateur sports in America?

RB: Interesting idea.

EB: LaMar Hunt didn’t like this.

RB: Oh, that right? [Laughter]

EB: He closed his book, got up, walked out and [we] never saw him again.

RB: [Laughter] That was going to cut into the economics of that business.

EB: You know it very well. Special basketball, football — those are the two that are the primary beneficiaries of college sports.

RB: Fifteen months with the commission and they wrote a report.

EB: Before we were done, I had some inquiry from a friend of mine who worked for Korn Ferry. Korn Ferry was a new executive recruiting firm based in L. A. [Los Angeles, California]. I had a couple of friends who worked for them. They said, “Have you ever considered this type of work?” I said, “No. I considered, maybe, talking to you folks on the other side.” I had an MBA, but I had never worked in the private sector. I thought it would be a good opportunity to get an introduction back to the private sector. So I joined Korn Ferry. Five years later I [was] made [a] partner.

RB: Did you move from DC?

EB: I moved back to L. A. and married Pam. She was going to be starting her business school [education] at UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles]. It was good timing.

RB: Were you an executive recruiter or did you have —?

EB: I was, I was a head hunter. We were retained by companies to find people to fill jobs. We didn’t represent the [person] looking for a job. We represented the company to find people to fill jobs. It was a great experience from the standpoint of going into an organization, spending several hours with the CEO [chief executive officer] or whomever your client was going to be, reading between the lines, hearing what they were saying, but understanding what they needed. I did that for thirty years. That was my employment. I thought I would do it for a couple of years and I ended up going for thirty-three [years].

RB: You started there about 1975, perhaps?

EB: [In] 1976. I remember it was the bicentennial year.

RB: For the next thirty years [or] so, into 2006.

EB: [I left] in 2008.

RB: [Did you] live in Los Angeles?

EB: We bought a home in San Marino [California]. I commuted over to Century City [California]. After six years I left Korn Ferry and went to work for Russell Reynolds Associates. You learn when you work for a company that every company has a culture. It either fits or doesn’t fit your own personal culture. Korn Ferry was cut throat. Your partners were your biggest competitors and Russell

Reynolds was very team oriented. They compensated people for teamwork. Every year you were judged on how many assists you had with your fellow associates. I really liked Russell Reynolds. I was getting a little itchy to do something besides just staying and working in L. A. Russell Reynolds had an opening in Singapore. So I raised my hand. They said you are too valuable in L. A. I said, "Yes, but I would like to do something and stretch myself a little bit." I thought living in Singapore and allowing my [children] to be minorities in another culture would be a good experience for them. Plus American schools are outstanding over there. They said, "We want you to stay here." Korn Ferry came back after me. At the time, I was the biggest producer in L. A. for Russell Reynolds.

RB: What was time frame at Russell Reynolds?

EB: I was at Korn Ferry from 1976 to 1983 then 1983 to 1988 [with Russell Reynolds]. So I was [there] six years. Then I was recruited back to Korn Ferry. I ran the Pacific Northwest [region] out of Seattle [Washington]. It was a good experience running your own show. Also I was working in an environment that was not very mature as a consulting community. As a matter of fact, we put together an ad-hoc group of people from [Arthur] Anderson Consulting and other consulting firms in Seattle on how to build the reputation of the consultants. The people in Seattle thought what we did was great, but we should just give it to them. Why should they pay?

RB: Ultimately, did you retire about 2006?

EB: [It was in] 2008. That was done primarily because "JP" [his son] was killed in 2004 and three years later his mother [Pam] died of colon cancer. I wanted to do something else and it fell through. I said, "Well, I think I am being told that I should do something else."

RB: I wanted to get back to your experience with your son's death in Iraq. Would you tell a little bit about his military service?

EB: I had three children.

RB: [What] were their names?

EB: Christina, Alex and "JP." "JP" is [for] James Patrick. I can't say "JP" was not my favorite because you love all your children. You love them dearly, but he allowed me to be part of his life. He and I were very close. When we lived up in Seattle there was a vacant lot between our houses because there was a sewer line going through and it couldn't be developed. He would go down to the basement. We had a beautiful big, old house, a mansion built between 1908 and 1910. It was a beautiful house. He would put on my jungle military [uniforms] that were in a sea bag down there. He would get an etool and dig a hole in the yard to sit in it.

BF: [Laughter]

EB: He was crazy that way. He had an affinity for the military. When one of his friends from Plymouth Prep [received] an appointment to the Naval Academy, this kind of put that bar up for him — “if Andrew can go there maybe I can go there.” He was a phenomenal athlete.

RB: What did he play?

EB: Football and track. He was good in soccer, but he was incredible in football and track.

RB: Was this in Seattle?

EB: No, this was in Southern California. I [had] moved back [to] Korn Ferry in 1993.

RB: [Did] he go to high school in Southern California?

EB: [For the] seventh and eighth grades and then high school. He was named to three All-American teams coming out of a little private school. He was one of the 100 top recruited athletes in California. California with forty million people and being one of the top 100 —.

RB: That was great! Was the name of his school Plymouth Prep?

EB: Plymouth Preparatory School, yes.

RB: Where is that located?

EB: In La Canada [California]. He had probably fifty letters from football programs across the country. We organized a trip to go back during the spring break and we visited the Naval Academy [Annapolis, Maryland]. We visited [the University of] Virginia [Charlottesville, Virginia]. We visited Wake Forest [University, Winston-Salem, North Carolina]. We visited [the College of] William and Mary [Williamsburg, Virginia]. We visited Bucknell [University, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania] where his brother was going to school. He liked the Naval Academy. That is what we kind of focused on. They liked his skill set. Unfortunately, the Naval Academy under Charlie Weatherby was a double wing triple option offense. I said, ““JP” is a west California style quarterback.” He said if he can pass the ball as well as we think he can —. They didn’t change a thing.

RB: [Did] he get an appointment to the Naval Academy?

EB: Yes. He [received] both an appointment from a congressman and the governors committee gave him one, too.

RB: What time period was that? When did he graduate from high school?

EB: [In] 1999.

RB: So he went to the Naval Academy from 1999 to 2003.

EB: He graduated and [received] his commission in 2003 in the Marine Corps. He went down to Quantico and went through six months of basic school. He wanted to be an infantry officer. Actually, the Marine Corps is very stingy with MOS's [Military Occupational Specialty] for the infantry.

RB: Is that right?

EB: Yes, because you have somebody commanding a lot of young marines and they better be good at what they do. He went through ten weeks of the infantry officer's course, IOC, which was 1,100 hours of training in ten weeks. That is a lot of training.

RB: That is a lot of training!

EB: They knew where they were going to go. They expected that the Iraqis would use chemical weapons, so they did a lot of training in hazmat suits. He got out of IOC in May 2004. He had been assigned to the Fifth Marine Regiment. Joe Dunford was the regimental commander, a good buddy of mine, who was a former regimental commander. He wanted to be in the Fifth Marines because that was where I served. They put him Third Battalion because that was the battalion I served with in Vietnam. He went through about four months —

[END OF RECORDING FOUR.]

EB: — at Camp Pendleton training to go to Fallujah. They had gone into Fallujah in the spring of 2004. At that time, the President [George W. Bush], called off the assault which was a big mistake because they were about two days away from having the city taken down. So the insurgents got a chance to get a real foothold there.

RB: When did he go to Iraq?

EB: He left September 10, 2004. That was his deployment date. He celebrated his 24th birthday on September 26, [2004]. He had a great sense of humor. He sent out e-mails to all his buddies saying they were having a fiesta in Fallujah [laughter] and you can park your camel for nothing!

BF: [Laughter]

RB: [Laughter] That is great! What kind of personality did he have?

EB: I have to tell you a story. When he came home in December of 2003, it was right after they found Saddam Hussein in that spider hole. The year before, he had come down the stairs as Tiny Tim for Christmas. This Christmas day we went downstairs and there are notes on a lot of the doors saying different cities in Iraq. We couldn't find "JP." The door to the basement opens up and he has an old wig he had for Halloween. He has this beard on his face. He had [long] hair and hair coming out of his shirt. He was Saddam Hussein. [Laughter] He was crazy!

BF: [Laughter]

RB: He was crazy! He had a sense of humor! [Laughter]

EB: A great sense of humor! We had stories when he was at Annapolis [Maryland]. They had to clean their rooms. So here is "JP" on the floor with his Speedo swim suit on, swimming goggles, using a toothbrush. Somebody is filming it and putting it on the internet. He had a lot of friends there.

BF: [Laughter]

RB: [Laughter] Well liked.

EB: Well liked.

RB: When was he killed?

EB: He was killed on Veterans Day, 2004. [Emotional]

RB: Can you explain what happened from what you know?

EB: They went into Fallujah on November 7, [2004]. His platoon was one of the lead elements going in. The colonel had them as the point unit for all four days. When you are the point unit you are much more active than everybody else. I asked them why they kept the third platoon in acquisition. He said because they were the ones who could do what we needed to have done.

RB: What was his role?

EB: He was platoon commander. They had been going through houses and the insurgents did a backfill, keeping behind them. They had to go back, start over and clear out all the houses once again. That morning was the day after that photograph was taken. One of his fire team leaders was shot in the face. It was pretty shocking to see one of your team mates with a lot of his teeth missing. He survived Clay South. "JP" had to get his platoon together and get them to get their head back in the game. They kept going. They got into a house. He went with the team up to the roof. They had two other teams that were down in the street. The

day before, his radio man had injured his back. So “JP” foolishly was carrying a radio. Snipers take out command and control. If you are a radio man you are in command and control. He is on the roof with this PRC25 [portable radio communication] on his back, pointing across the street and he is hit in the left shoulder.

RB: He was a target then.

EB: There were three KIAs [killed in action] within the company. All three were hit by snipers. All were carrying radios. He was hit in the shoulder. He said, “I’m hit.” Dropped and he was dead. The round hit his shoulder because he was doing this, [gesturing to show a bullet hitting shoulder and moving to his heart] so it was rounded out, deflected to his heart and it landed in his hip. I had gone down to a Change of Command Ceremony at Camp Pendleton. I knew the regimental commander was still back at Quantico. We had no casualties with either Lima Company or Kilo Company.

RB: What was your son’s company?

EB: He was with Lima Third Platoon.

RB: But that was wrong?

EB: He hadn’t been hit.

RB: Oh, the day before.

EB: It was a Marine Corps birthday celebration. I went home that night. I knew they were in Fallujah. I came round the bend to our house.

RB: Were you living in La Canada?

EB: I was in San Marino [California]. I would keep looking for a car.

RB: Because you knew what that would mean.

EB: The next day I went down for a Marine’s birthday dinner in Newport Beach [California with] a friend of mine. I called Pam that night to tell her I was coming home. There was no answer. That was good news. I drove home and pulled in the driveway. The Marines had moved the car a couple of houses down so I wouldn’t see it. I went to the front door and I was putting the key in the door. Pam said, “You better come in the kitchen.” I walked in the kitchen and there was a captain and a warrant officer.

RB: You knew what that meant.

EB: Oh sure. It is sad. [Emotional] I think of God gave me a heads up. I woke up in September after July before he had deployed. I wake up from a dream. At 2:30 [a.m.] I see a car pull up in front of the house and two marines walk to the front door. I kept having that dream night after night. So we said goodbye to “JP” on September 10, [2004]. We took him to dinner with his girlfriend, her parents, Pam, my [children], my mother-in-law [and] took them back to her house. Alex cut his hair. Took him down. He was shaved, pretty close cropped. He walked us out to our car. I gave him a hug and a kiss. “Be safe and come home.” “I will, dad.” I step back and I never saw him again.

RB: You knew.

EB: I knew. Pam felt the same way. We drove home [and] for an hour couldn’t talk, just stewing inside. When it happened we weren’t shocked. You are shocked.

RB: You knew it probably wasn’t going to end well. How did you take that? What was it like to experience the loss of your son in battle?

EB: You are half expecting it. I had some things I had to do before that night. That night Martin [his daughter’s fiancé] slept at our house. He and Christina had not been married yet. He saw the marines waiting out front. He said, “Come on in and have some tea.” They said, “No, we will wait out here.” He said, “I know why you are here. Come on in.” And they did.

After I got home, Pam [came] home. Alex drove down town and [Martin] picked up Christina and her grandmother and brought [them] back up to our house. So at two o’clock in the morning we are sitting in our bedroom talking, kind of numb. There is a numbness to it. Christina said, “Dad, are you mad at God?” I said, “No.” She said, “But dad you have been praying for “JP” for months and He took him.” I said, “Christina, sometimes God says no. I don’t think He would take him without having a positive plan in place.” That just turned out to be quite amazing that his —. [Emotional]

RB: Tell about the impact he has had.

EB: Like I told you over the telephone, I hope when I die that I have half the recognition he has had with his death.

RB: What kinds of things [have] happened?

EB: Friends of his, with our support, started a scholarship in his name at Flintridge Preparatory. It is now worth about \$650,000.00. There is a 5K run that used to be the San Marino Fourth of July Run that has been renamed the “JP” Blecksmith Memorial 5K Run. Nine hundred people a year show up for it. The Marine Corps named the Reserve Training Center in passing after him. It is now called Blecksmith Hall.

RB: What a legacy!

EB: His classmates at the Naval Academy —

EB: — put out a patch with a big “JP”. It says: “Remember “JP” friend, Marine hero.” It says: USNA 2003 KIA 9/11/2004.

RB: That says so much about who he was.

EB: Friends of his told me that when word spread at Annapolis people were really bummed out. You don’t think one of your friends is [going to die].

[END OF RECORDING FIVE.]

EB: We have his headstone at the San Gabriel Cemetery [California] which is where the Pattons have their plot, even though General Patton is buried in Belgium. At “JP’s” funeral there were probably 2,000 people. We had people at our house every night, probably 100 people minimum. My liquor supply [was] resupplied big time. They drank it all, too. The dumpster was full of empty beer cans, beer bottles and pizza boxes. It was just amazing.

RB: You said last week, when we were talking, you compared saying goodbye to the troops you lost under your command in Vietnam versus losing your own son. You said there was no comparison, really. What did you mean by that?

EB: You have no idea what the parents [feel until you experience it yourself]. Certainly it was sad for me, I agree. It was the worst day of my life seeing those fifteen marines lying out in their ponchos. When I lost “JP” it demonstrated to me that while I may have grieved [for] the parents back home when they got the news, it was ten times worse.

RB: You had that insight?

EB: I felt guilty that I had not [been] as close to some of the parents [of my men]. Larry Peters was one [who] I really liked a lot, so I tracked down his brother and sister. They both lived in Florida. I apologized to them for not making contact after I [came] back home. At the time, [you wondered] what you could tell them that would make them feel better? After I lost “JP” I knew [and I then] could understand.

RB: We will finish [this interview] here. I appreciate your sharing this part of your story as part two of what we talked about last week. Thank you very much.

[END OF RECORDING SIX. END OF INTERVIEW.]