

Shoener, George US Army

[00:00:13.63] GEORGE SHOENER: I was born in Scranton, Pennsylvania, in 1943, February 1943, went to grade school there, middle school, high school.

[00:00:28.92] GEORGE SHOENER: When I graduated, I did not go to college. I got a job in a factory when I graduated. My folks could not afford to send me to college. And after I worked in the factory for about six months, I decided to join the Army. I had-- knew some other people who had joined the Army and I decided to do it. I had not yet turned 18 years old, so my mother had to sign the papers for me to join the Army. And I joined the Army in February of 1961.

[00:01:07.66] GEORGE SHOENER: When I joined, I took basic training at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, then took training as a medic in Fort Sam Houston, Texas. Then I was put on orders to go to Germany. But at that time, the Cuban crisis was taking place in the United States. My orders were changed from going to Germany to going to Alaska because there was a fear that if we got into a conflict with Cuba, the Soviet Union would intervene and would possibly try to enter into the United States through Alaska. So troops were sent to Alaska to protect our airfields up there. And I was one of the ones sent up there.

[00:01:49.18] So I was in Alaska in 1962. And one day, I was walking down the hall, I was a medic with an infantry unit, and I was walking down the hall. The first sergeant was supposed to have sent somebody over to take the West Point exam at the Education Center, and he had forgotten all about it. And I was walking down the hall, and he said, Shoener, go take this exam, because if I don't send somebody over to take the exam, I'll be in trouble because the regimental commander was a West Point graduate.

[00:02:24.08] So I went over and took the exam and passed. And then I was-- once I passed the exam, then there was a physical exam. And I was sent to the US Army Prep School at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, and competed for an appointment to the US Military Academy at West Point. Actually, the prep school prepared you for any of the academies, but this was the Army Prep School. And there were 180 of us that started the school. There were 27 US Army appointments available to go to West Point.

[00:03:01.52] I did go ahead and take the SATs and did well on the SATs. And I became qualified to go to West Point, but I was qualified with no vacancy. The Army gives 27 appointments. And as you're well aware, congressional appointments are given, presidential appointments. I did not get one of the 27 that was from the Army.

[00:03:25.75] After that, I spent probably two months knocking on the doors of Congress to try and find somebody to get me an appointment to West Point. To no avail. But once again, when John F. Kennedy was president, he decided to expand all the academies and doubled the size. And with doubling the size, we went from 27 appointments to 54. And I got one of those.

[00:03:49.40] And so I went to West Point. I went to West Point, graduated four years later in 1968. Upon graduation, went to Ranger School, got my tab at Ranger School, then went to

Airborne School, got my wings. Then I was assigned to Fort Hood, Texas where I-- as a young lieutenant I had a platoon for about six months.

[00:04:14.11] Then I was given command of a company, construction engineers. And then in July of 1970, I was put on orders to go to Vietnam. And I reported to Vietnam, went to Vietnam in August of '70. And went out to Seattle, Washington, got on an airplane, flew to Vietnam, and arrived, I think, it was like August 3 of 1971.

[00:04:46.81] ANDREW RINGLEE: Can you talk a little bit about how your knowledge of the war in Southeast Asia changed before you went to Vietnam?

[00:04:53.86] GEORGE SHOENER: Oh, absolutely. Well, again, I lived through the whole thing while I was at West Point. And when we went in to West Point in 1964, I think there were probably just small groups over in Vietnam, maybe helping to take care of people in the villages, maybe helping with some training of the South Vietnamese Army.

[00:05:16.46] And that was how it-- so when I went in '64, we were really not at war yet. And so over those four years, a lot of the instruction and training at the Academy, especially in the last two years, was from officers who were teaching in the classroom had already served in Vietnam and had been exposed to combat. So some of those returning officers were brought right to West Point to teach.

[00:05:45.59] And so I had pretty good knowledge about what was happening, and how the war was changing, and how our Soldiers were changing because of the draft, and because of the Civil Rights movements of 1965. So there was just a lot going on. And of course, 1968 was a very explosive year. When I graduated, we had people running for president assassinated. We had Martin Luther King assassinated.

[00:06:16.39] And so there was just a lot of turmoil in the United States at that time. And again, there was a large voice against the war. But again, as an Army officer, as a trained Army officer, I felt it was my duty to go ahead. And I volunteered to go to Vietnam. And when I was at Fort Hood, Texas, I volunteered to go to Vietnam. And so I felt I had a duty and a responsibility as an officer in the United States Army to go to where the action was.

[00:06:54.78] GEORGE SHOENER: I had a month's leave before I went to Vietnam. So I spent that with my family, of course. I had a son who had not yet turned one. He was born while I was at Fort Hood, Texas. He had not yet turned one. And my wife was pregnant at the time that I did actually leave. As I said before, flew out of Seattle, Washington, landed in Vietnam.

[00:07:19.77] Once I got in Vietnam, I was told what my duty was going to be in Vietnam. Normally, they wouldn't tell you until you got there because you had to meet whatever the needs were once you got there. So I did not know what my position would be until I got there, but I was told I was going to be a company commander for a headquarters company in the 75th Battalion of the 1st Infantry Division, 1st Brigade of the 5th Infantry Division.

[00:07:47.64] And that is not what I wanted. I did not want to have-- be an administrative company commander. I wanted responsibility for engineers because that's what I was trained to be, as a commander of engineers. And so while I was in Tan Son Nhut Air Force Base, where the aircraft landed-- Tiger Airlines flew me over there, by the way.

[00:08:11.65] While I was in Tan Son Nhut Air Force Base, I called up to the 1st Brigade, 5th Division, got hold of the adjutant, told the adjutant I would prefer not to be a commander of an administrative type company, but of an engineer company. He said just get on a plane, and when you get up here, we can talk about it. And so I flew up to Quang Tri, Vietnam, which was up in I Corps, about nine miles from the DMZ.

[00:08:38.71] And when I got there, I reported to headquarters. I was able to meet with the deputy commander, Colonel Traynor, and told him what I'd like to do. I'd like to command an engineer company. And there was only one engineer company within the brigade. And he said, he would talk to the commanding officer, which was General Hill at the time. And he did.

[00:09:04.24] And I got a call the next day while I was in the replacement detachment, and told that I would be taking command of the engineer company in the 1st Brigade, 5th Division, which was A Company, 7th Engineer Battalion. And so after I left the replacement detachment-- actually, while I was at the replacement detachment, I was able to walk down just a couple of blocks to where A Company had their company area.

[00:09:31.27] And I was able to walk through the company area, and I was kind of disappointed. I think the morale was low. As I walked through the company area, I saw several vials of-- empty vials that had been used to contain heroin. I did not get many salutes when I walked through the area. And so I knew I had a big job ahead of me, once I took over the company.

[00:10:02.09] GEORGE SHOENER: Actually, what I did next, I took over the company. The next day, met with the existing company commander. It was a Captain Leon Yourtee at the time. He eventually became a colonel in the Army. And he passed away in 1993, Leon Yourtee. He was also a West Point graduate.

[00:10:20.87] So I took over the company. In order to make sure that they knew I had arrived, I held a haircut inspection the very next morning. And a lot of grumbling about a haircut inspection in a combat zone, but I knew I had to make sure my presence was known. So I had a lieutenant who also needed a haircut. And they-- by the way, I was a captain when I got there. I had a lieutenant, a couple sergeants, and maybe 15 other enlisted people that needed haircuts. So I had the lieutenant march them down to the barber shop to get a haircut.

[00:10:57.03] And so that was my first introduction. There were other things too. The place-- I lived in a Southeast Asian hut where my company was located, our base camp. Our base camp was called Camp Red Devil because the 1st Brigade, 5th Division-- the 5th Division is the Red Devils. They were given that name during World War II. So we based out of Camp Red Devil.

[00:11:24.63] The company size was probably one of the largest companies in Vietnam. There were 256 men assigned to the company. And during my tour there, we got up to well over 300

men when we got into some of the very hard combat operations. But the hooch I was in, somebody had boarded up the whole bottom of the hooch because they were afraid that maybe there might be a possible somebody throwing a frag grenade into the officer's hooch where I was at. And so I had them remove that.

[00:12:04.14] I started making sure that people saluted me when I was in the company area, even though some people say you really shouldn't be saluting officers anywhere near the combat zone. I figured I needed to show my presence. Had inspections, some vehicle inspections to make sure that our equipment was in good shape.

[00:12:26.77] The company consisted of three combat engineer platoons and a bridge platoon. Each combat engineer platoon had three armored personnel carriers. They had a bulldozer, a concrete mixer, various pioneer equipment. The bridge platoon was made up of-- I don't know-- maybe 45 bridge trucks, which was able to load enough M4T6 bridge to build just about any bridge you needed in Vietnam.

[00:12:57.93] And along with that, we also had two armored vehicle-launched bridge pieces of equipment. That was a piece of equipment that could launch a bridge like that. And we had some combat-- two combat engineer vehicles, which fired a 155 millimeter weapon round. It was pretty much a weapon used as a demolition gun, basically. And just doing the things that you needed to do as a good commander.

[00:13:38.48] And things started to turn around, morale started to get a little bit better, kept people busy. We were very busy. We were building. The brigade I was in, we had armor. We had mechanized infantry. We had ground infantry. And we had cavalry units. So we built tank pads for the armor so that they could get their vehicles off the mud and dirt so that they could pull the maintenance on them.

[00:14:09.99] We helped the infantry by making sure that when they were helicopter-lifted to a landing zone that we could go into landing zone and clear the landing zone with the saws that we had and the demolitions needed to clear landing zones. We used our demolition guns with the armor also. Whenever there were problems with the VC or the NVA in caves, the demolition gun was much more suitable than their tank guns for doing that. So it kept everybody busy.

[00:14:45.72] Again, we were up along the DMZ. I was with the 1st Brigade, 5th Division. We replaced the Marines that were up in that division. When we landed, we replaced the Marines. The Marines had taken a pretty good beating out in Khe Sanh along the DMZ in 1968, around the same time as the Tet Offensive. And so the brigade went in there to replace them.

[00:15:11.36] And the brigade ended up moving into Quang Tri, Dong Ha, and two places called C2 and A4. History definitely shows that when McNamara was secretary of defense, one of his plans was to try and build these outposts along the DMZ to keep the North-- NVA from coming down from the north. And then also to keep vehicles coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. So he had this one line of defense, was A, the A line, and then there was the C line.

[00:15:48.95] And we had people stationed at C2, and A4, which A4, you could actually stand on A4, and you could look across the DMZ, and watch some of the North Vietnamese training with a pair of binoculars, of course, but you could actually see it. And you could even see the flag at the place where they were doing the training. We had two highways running through pretty much our area. We had QL1 and QL9. QL1 ran north and south. And QL9 ran from Dong Ha, out to Khe Sanh, out to the Laotian border.

[00:16:31.92] GEORGE SHOENER: It was our job as engineers, every morning, when we got up, our first job was to patrol those roads to make sure there were no mines, nobody had planted any mines in the roads. We would check all the culverts along the road to make sure that there was no demolitions or mines in those culverts. And then we did our daily mine sweep of the dirt roads. It was a dirt road that ran from QL9 up to A4 and C2. And so we would sweep those roads with mine detectors.

[00:17:05.23] We also provided drinking water. We had a water purification units. We had two of those. We had one that provided drinking water for just about the whole area up in I Corps. And then we had another small unit between C2 and A4 that provided drinking water. So the roads were dirt roads. When the monsoons came, a lot of areas on high ground became independent islands because of the monsoons.

[00:17:39.49] So we ended up-- our APCs, they could swim. In addition-- with proper taking care of the vehicle, they could swim. So we did a lot of recovery operations for the units that we supported, whether it was tanks getting stuck, or people getting stranded, or needing a bridge to get from one place to another. We did that.

[00:18:05.65] I probably would-- in the first two months, I would say, it was probably within the first two months I got there, a bridge on QL1 was blown up. And QL1 was pretty much a main road from Da Nang as a supply route to get supplies up to the north. And so a bridge had been blown out. I had been called by the brigade engineer to fly out there, and take a look, and try to do repairs to the bridge, but it was beyond repair. It needed replacing. And it was about a 45-foot span.

[00:18:40.03] And so when I got there, I said, well, there's two ways we can probably fix this. One would-- being our M4T6, which was like an erector set, you could put the pieces together and end up with a nice bridge, or we could use our AVLB, armored vehicle-launched vehicle, and lay the bridge across where that bridge had been demolished because the AVLB is a 60-foot bridge. It has a 60-foot span.

[00:19:06.58] But where we were located, in Quang Tri, we could not get the AVLB to where we wanted it to be because to get it there, we needed to cross another river. And that bridge could not carry the 60 tons that this particular AVLB weighed. So we could not get it across the bridge. By the way, just as a side note, the Marine Seabees were building a new bridge across that river. And had it been done, we could have taken the bridge across.

[00:19:36.47] So we went over there. We put in the M4T6 bridge. We were able to get traffic moving again. But again, the M4T6 bridge would require a lot of maintenance to keep traffic

running on it. And I got a call from my XO saying, hey, I think I found a way that we can get the AVLB over to where you're located. And I asked how. And he said, well, the Seabees, as part of their construction for this new bridge, have a raft that can get-- you can put the AVLB on the raft, and get it across the river.

[00:20:11.09] And once we get it on the other side, we can get it down to where you're at, and we could just put it right into place. Well, it was a good plan except when it got on the raft, it did not stay on the raft, and he ended up dumping it right in the middle of the river. And so once I had the M4T6 bridge in place, my next job was to recover the bridge that got dumped in the drink. And so we did get it out.

[00:20:35.42] We had divers in our company. And we were a good engineer bridge company, so we did have divers. So we were able to dive in, hook the chains up to the bridge, the AVLB, and parked our-- we had D7 dozers-- parked the D7 dozer, had winches on the back, and used a cable, and pulled the AVLB out of the drink.

[00:20:57.26] And we got it up onto the banks OK. And then as we were pulling it up off the bank, we ran over a bunker that was being manned by the South Vietnamese. It was the South Vietnamese Reserve/National Guard type unit that was there. And so we ran over part of the bunker.

[00:21:18.86] And so the lieutenant I had out there recovering the AVLB, he calls me up on the radio, and tells me that he is being held captive by a South Vietnamese lieutenant who has a weapon pointed at him saying that when we ran-- when we pulled the AVLB up onto the bank over this bunker, the South Vietnamese had left two M16s in the bunker, and they were destroyed. And so he wanted those M16s replaced before he would let my lieutenant go.

[00:21:50.66] So I ended up-- we have people in our brigade, S-5 within our brigade. There was a major there. And he has dealt with things like this before and spoke fluent Vietnamese. I called him up, and he and I went out there. We made sure that the lieutenant knew we were going to go ahead and give him the weapons that were destroyed. And he released my lieutenant.

[00:22:14.39] So I got my lieutenant back, got my AVLB back. I sent sandbags back to make sure that we replaced the bunker that we destroyed. And so we went on our way. So that was one of my early on things to do. We had no enemy activity during that period. It was a little touch and go because by the time we put the bridge in, it was still dark, and we still had to convoy back to Quang Tri.

[00:22:40.31] But we had good security. We had a cav unit supporting us. And by the way, our APCs were well armed. They had .50 caliber machine guns. And we also had M60 machine guns. So we could provide some of our own security, but we always preferred having somebody else while we were working. And they provided the security. And it was-- enemy-wise, it was uneventful.

[00:23:04.25] ANDREW RINGLEE: Did you have any leisure time?

[00:23:06.56] GEORGE SHOENER: Yeah. Yeah. I kind of had leisure time. When we get back-- when you were out each day-- and by the way, it was a seven day a week-- we tried to kind of keep Sunday afternoons as kind of a time where we could do what we wanted. And we tried to have a barbecue or something within the company area. But we did.

[00:23:29.56] We put up screens in the motor pool. I think we used like six or eight pieces of 4 x 8 plywood and we built the screen. So we had film come-- 16 millimeter films come over. And so we were able to watch movies on occasion. We could do that within the base camp, Camp Red Devil.

[00:23:53.83] In the evenings, it was pretty much-- when it got dark, you pretty much hunkered down. And that was the time to relax a little bit, but there was always things going on too. But you paid attention to what was going on with radio traffic. But you could still relax, write letters home, read, pretty much do what you want.

[00:24:19.10] We had, again, just another leisure activity. We had-- with the Civil Rights movement, it was still going on at the time. And I think a lot of the blacks and the Chicanos-- we had a lot of those within the engineer unit. And they were very proud of their heritage. And it was back at that time where-- when we were in base camp, and we weren't out actually doing maneuvers or supporting somebody, the blacks would congregate together, and the Chicanos would congregate together, and the good old boys from the South would congregate together. And sometimes that caused some issues.

[00:25:01.50] And one of the things, I got my first sergeant, and we had the wherewithal that we could build a basketball court. Now when I was a kid growing up, I played basketball all the time. And you'd choose sides by whoever made the foul shots. So you'd play half court game. The first three guys that would make the foul shot would play with the next three guys who made the foul shot that come up with the game. So it had nothing to do whether you were black or white, or who you were, or how tall you were, or how short you were. If you made the foul shot, you were on the first team. If you made the second set, you were on the second team.

[00:25:40.94] So we had the concrete mixers. We had 16S mixers, which you could mix up a 16 cubic feet of concrete at any given time. We had the cement available. We had the sand, the aggregate, the wire. We had everything. There was a Special Forces office located within our brigade area. And I went there, and went to see if I could get them to get a hold for me a basketball hoop, and a backboard, and a pole. And they were able to get it for me.

[00:26:16.15] So by the time we had the concrete poured, and we had everything in place. The basketball hoop showed up. The basketball showed up. The backboard showed up. So we had everything laid out in the back of our company area. And so we ended up creating a basketball court. It took a little while for people to kind of get in there, but the first sergeant and I went down. We shot a few hoops.

[00:26:41.95] People started showing up, making fun of us because we weren't that good, but they were making fun of us. But all of a sudden, they started playing games. And the groups

were playing together. So it was just another way of keeping them from segregating themselves and causing problems. And so they got to play together. And that was another leisure activity.

[00:27:05.02] And between where my unit was located and the artillery unit behind me, there was a USO stage. And so the USO would bring shows in. I would say, they were probably of less than average quality, but they would bring them in, and the troops would show up for them, and do their hooting and hollering, and have a good time. But it was just unusual to hear the Korean teams come in and sing country-western music. And so it was-- but it was entertaining.

[00:27:36.01] And that probably happened, like maybe once every two or three months. And I was fortunate that this Christmas I was there-- I was there in a Christmas '70-- Bob Hope did show up in Da Nang, which was south of us. So I was able to release a lot of the Soldiers, a lot of the engineers to go down and see Bob Hope at the Christmas Show. So that was good. GEORGE SHOENER: No. Not really. Not where I was at. No.

[00:28:09.08] ANDREW RINGLEE: How about South Vietnamese?

[00:28:11.24] GEORGE SHOENER: Some South Vietnamese, yes. And again, it was-- the South Viet-- I found the South Vietnamese soldiers were very good soldiers. They followed orders. They tried to do everything right. I think their leadership left a lot to be desired. And I think that was probably the feeling-- a lot of the American officers felt the same way that the leadership, when given the financial or equipment support of the United States, the leaders would abuse that, and it would never-- it would not always get down to the front-line soldier whether it was food, or supplies, or whatever it was.

[00:28:57.89] But I ended up turning over my equipment when I left in July of '71. My unit was standing down. The 5th Division was folding up its colors. And my unit, the equipment was turned over to a South Vietnamese unit. So my bridging equipment, my armored personnel carriers, everything was turned over to them. So that was really the only contact I really had with them, but not with any of the other allies, not with the Koreans, the Australians, New Zealanders. I did not really have contact with them.

[00:29:45.61] GEORGE SHOENER: Primarily with letters. Like I said, there was time to write so we'd communicate with letters. We'd communicate with tape, the tape recorder, the small disk, you would do that. And if you timed it right, you could make a phone call. And so I used to try and set it up so that I could speak to my wife in the middle of the night when there wasn't a lot of people waiting to get on the phone.

[00:30:22.21] And so you would call. The operator from our base would contact an operator in the United States, who would then contact another operator and another operator and eventually-- so that whenever you spoke, when I spoke to my wife, you'd have to be able to say "over" each time you finished whatever you wanted to say so that everybody would to throw the switches along the way to have it transfer to the other direction.

[00:30:50.70] And I would say, I was able probably to call home like once every two or three months, I was able to do that. And I had an R&R. So I met my wife on R&R. I had R&R in

March of '71. And we met in Hawaii. And so I was able to spend a week away from Vietnam. So that was the other way of doing it.

[00:31:26.23] GEORGE SHOENER: The officers-- I had both ROTC officers, Reserve Officer Training Corps officers, and OCS officers. And of course, the OCS, they were called 90-day Wonders because it took 90 days for them to get their commission. They went through OCS. I found them-- the OCS officers were probably a little more disciplined, I should say, than the ROTC officers. They kind of knew what was required of them.

[00:32:05.17] The ROTC officers probably took a little more hand-holding in making sure they understood what the requirements are and how they should handle their men. Again, the OCS, most of them were enlisted before they became officers, so they had a very good understanding of the requirements of the enlisted. And so they were able to do that. I guess, they were known as Mustangs because they were enlisted and they became officers. So they were Mustang officers.

[00:32:35.51] The sergeants were good. They were young. Most of them were young. They were, again, they were enlisted, went to the NCO School and came out as sergeants. And they were known as Shake-n-Bakes. So they were enlisted. So they were the Shake-n-Bake NCOs. And they were good too. They were young, but they were good. They were disciplined.

[00:33:01.49] Some of the older sergeants, the sergeants left-- some of those left over from Korea just didn't understand what was going on with regard to the change in young men and women in the United States at that particular time. And some of them struggled with it. They did not-- they figured if you talked to an enlisted man, and you told them he had to do something, well, he did it without question. Well, the draftee that we had, and even the enlisted, those that enlisted, would question a lot of your orders. So you had to be a little more specific. And you had to be a little more attentive so that they did understand.

[00:33:49.04] The Soldiers were good. I think when they were given a mission, they were good on the mission. They knew they had to work hard. They had to pay attention. Their life depended on it a lot of times. I mean, you couldn't be very slack when you were walking down the road with a mine detector. You couldn't be very slack when you were setting explosives. So you had to be attentive. And even in the armored personnel carriers, driving that big piece of equipment, or any of the engineering equipment, you had to be attentive.

[00:34:21.47] We did have a drug problem. As I mentioned earlier, we found those vials. The tendency was you could buy heroin very cheaply anywhere. If you left the camp or if you were away at all, there was somebody on a motor scooter willing to sell you drugs. And the Soldiers ended up buying these little Vicks inhalers that you put in your nose, inhaled Vicks. They would remove the Vicks and put the heroin in that. And that was how they were using the heroin. It was so good, and so cheap, and so strong that they didn't need to inject it. They didn't need to inhale-- they inhaled it. It was that simple. It was that cheap.

[00:35:05.68] And I tried. I tried to help the people that were on drugs get off of it. I tried one time. I just went out in front of the formation, had everybody form up again in the company area. We didn't have formations very often, but had everybody form out. And I knew maybe six or

seven guys who were using drugs, but I told them I was going to run a program where I was going to let you try and get off the drugs before you went back stateside.

[00:35:38.45] And so I said, I know who all the drug users are. You can get into this program. And if you refuse to get into the program, and I know who you are, I'm going to go ahead and start administering a bad conduct or other than honorable discharge, undesirable discharge. And so I knew maybe a handful, but 20 showed up. So there were additional drug users that I was not aware of that wanted to get into the program so that they could dry up before coming back to the United States.

[00:36:18.11] And so we had the capability within my unit. We did have a crane. We had a rough terrain crane, and we had lowboy trucks that moved our bulldozers around. But with the crane and the lowboy truck, I could move buildings around. I could move these Southeast Asian huts. I could slide 8 x 8 pieces of lumber underneath the buildings, hook them up to a crane, and I could lift the building up, drop it on top of a lowboy, and I could move it wherever I wanted.

[00:36:48.20] Well, we had all these buildings that when the Marines-- when we replaced Marines, we replaced maybe half the number of people that they had when they were there. So I had all these empty buildings I could move around. So I ended up bringing this building in to my company area. And I was going to put these drug users into the building along with a medic so that he could help them over the hard times with some of the safe drugs, and moved them into this area, and it worked with some.

[00:37:21.69] In fact, while I was doing that I was interviewed by CBS-- actually, television was all over Vietnam. And you saw it every day. You saw it every day on television. But they were always in our area. But apparently, they had learned what I was doing with this and how I was trying to help these people. And so I did get an interview by CBS on how my program was going, how I identified the people, and the progress that was being made.

[00:37:53.58] And it was kind of successful because there was some-- again, you got to understand with the draftees, I ended up with people that were part of McNamara's 100,000, which were people that-- less than high school education, but I also ended up with those with PhDs. And so believe it or not, most of the drug users were educated people not the uneducated people.

[00:38:19.01] But I was surprised by some of the very intelligent people that were using drugs. And so it had limited success. Of course, everybody coming back from Vietnam had to take a urinalysis test, a urine test, to make sure they were off drugs before we sent them home. So those that were successful had a good journey home, but it was a challenge the whole time.

[00:38:45.32] And marijuana, I don't think anybody even tried to stop marijuana use because it was so prevalent that-- my company was located close to the replacement detachment, but on the other side of my company was where the leg infantry, the 1st of the 11th Infantry, was located. And there was a battalion sized unit there. And I could always tell when the company next to mine was back in from the field.

[00:39:13.44] They would spend a lot of time out in the field. I could tell when they were back in from the field because it would just be like a cloud hanging over the barracks from people smoking marijuana. But again, it was not-- for what they were going through, and living out in the jungle, I could see how it made them relax when they came in. Because when they were in the jungle, it was probably tense the whole time they were out there. So again, nobody really argued with marijuana.

[00:39:42.60] And people drank, of course. We had our own little enlisted club. And we had an NCO club within our area. So a lot of people drank and that was a problem too. You're taking these kids that are 18 and 19 years old, can't even drink back in the United States, and you're putting them into this situation in a combat area, and you're providing them all this alcohol.

[00:40:07.26] And they never had an opportunity at home to figure out how to drink, or what to drink, and they're now over here. So you had some challenges with people who were drinking a lot. Again, it was drinking a lot when they were back in base camp, not when they were out on in areas where their life might be in danger, but there were issues with that also.

[00:40:34.77] GEORGE SHOENER: Well, the most challenging mission was in January of 1971, an operation called LAM SON 719. And our part of it from the 1st Brigade was called DEWEY CANYON II. So it was DEWEY CANYON II, LAM SON 719. LAM SON 719 was the South Vietnamese incursion into Laos to stop the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

[00:41:07.21] I mean, we probably should have done that like five years before that, but that was the mission. The mission was for them to do that. The mission for the brigade, my brigade, was to get them out to Khe Sanh, to make sure that we had logistic support for them, that we had air support for them, and that it was going to be safe for all our troops as we were supporting the South Vietnamese into the incursion into Laos.

[00:41:35.58] In 1968, the Marines, 26th Marine Division, was out at Khe Sanh. And as I mentioned before, QL9 ran from Dong Ha to Khe Sanh. And in 1968, the North Vietnamese came down and cut off QL9. They cut it off so that we could not get supplies out to the Marines. And it was a challenge getting supplies out to them. There was air drops that were missed. There were just a lot of problems. And if you lose your line of communication, you're really losing a lot. And that's what happened in '68.

[00:42:16.41] When we went out on DEWEY CANYON II in LAM SON 719, my general, General Hill, wanted to make sure that no one was going to stop QL9 again. So he wanted my engineers to build a road north of QL9 through the mountains so that we could have patrols-- our cav patrol that road so that nothing could come down to stop QL9.

[00:42:45.00] And we did open up QL9 going out to Dewey Canyon. That was not my job. That was other engineer battalions. And they laid in five AVLB bridges and built four or five other bridges on the way out. My job was to build this pioneer trail where we could move armored personnel carriers and Sheridan tanks, which were the small tanks used by the cav units, could move back and forth on that road and provide security. And that was my big mission, it was to go build that road.

[00:43:15.09] And there were challenges because we had mountains to go over, we had water to cross, we had triple canopy jungle to go through. And so there were challenges along the way on that. We built the road. It took us nine days to build it. And we had some-- we were supposed to-- the road was supposed to be easily built because we were doing it before the monsoons came.

[00:43:44.92] And after four days out, the rains just came in, and the clouds hung low, and the fog came in. And one of the plans we had for that was that we were going to build all these culverts. If we ran into streams, we'd drop the culverts in there, push the dirt over them, and keep going. And we had built these 30 foot sections of culvert.

[00:44:14.56] And we were planning just to have them flown in with a flying crane or a large helicopter just lift them up, drop them in, and we'd covered them up. Well, with the fog coming in, we couldn't do that. So we ended up breaking the bridge. And then I called back to my-- my bridge platoon stayed in the rear-- I was with the main party that was building the road-- and called back and said, hey, we need to try and get that culvert out here.

[00:44:40.18] And so they broke down the 30 foot sections, loaded on the back of these bridge trucks. And the bridge trucks are a special kind of truck. They're supposed to be easily maneuverable around water or muddy areas and everything. They got these big old blown up tires on them, and the gears, and everything on the truck itself are built for terrain like you have in Vietnam. So it was good. But the trucks were able to bring the culvert out. And so that was amazing in itself that they were able to do that.

[00:45:12.50] So that was good on that part. We used a lot of explosives because initially starting, we had very rocky type mountains that we were going. It actually was called the Rock Pile. And so we used a lot of shaped charges where we'd blow a hole in the ground. And then we'd use explosives, C4, and dynamite to blow it out so that the dozers could go ahead and push along the side of a mountain.

[00:45:41.05] Once we got out there, to Khe Sanh, then the idea was to maintain that road. And we built other roads too. It ended up that the general liked the whole idea of us building roads, being protected by these cav units, that the cav units have these small Sheridan tanks and the armored personnel carriers would protect us as we were doing all this construction.

[00:46:07.57] So he had us building roads. Once we get out to Khe Sanh, he was finding all these other roads to build out to the Laotian border so that if they needed to come back, when they came back-- and they did come back-- there was ways for them to come back on the roads also. So we did a lot of that.

[00:46:27.79] While I was in Vietnam, I had nine people die in my company. Two of them died while I was on this operation. Two of them were in the platoon, 2d Platoon. They were part of the group that once the road was built, we had to go ahead and maintain it because there was steady road-- there was steady traffic on it from the cav unit.

[00:46:51.80] And they were out there doing their maintenance one day. And they got hit with an RPG, a rocket-propelled grenade. And it hit the back of the armored personnel carrier, and it

went into the armored personnel carrier itself, and these guys were down inside like they should be. And we had two casualties. And then two others were evacuated. Their names are on the Wall.

[00:47:21.82] But we had other enemy encounters while we were out there also. We had an RPG hit one of our graders. Again, as we were upgrading the roads, once you had the dozers doze the roads, once you're trying to keep them in decent shape, you had the grader come along so that water would flow off them and things like that.

[00:47:40.36] I'm surprised, I'm building the road out there, we never had any enemy contact. But it was once we started maintaining it is when we started running into issues with our equipment. The grader that got hit with the RPG, no one was injured in that. We just deadlined the vehicle, got it out of there, replaced it.

[00:48:02.32] ANDREW RINGLEE: These are small insurgent strikes or--

[00:48:04.72] GEORGE SHOENER: I beg your pardon?

[00:48:05.29] ANDREW RINGLEE: These are small insurgent strikes?

[00:48:06.70] GEORGE SHOENER: Yeah. Yeah. Ones-- which was common for the VC and the NVA-- or the VC, I should say. The VC would fire a weapon, go back into their hole, and get out of there. That's what they would do. And by the time you ended up reacting to it, they were gone.

[00:48:30.37] GEORGE SHOENER: Everybody went over for 365 days. And a lot of people said that-- was it really a nine year war? Or was it one-year wars fought nine times? Because every year, we had a whole different bunch of people over there fighting the war. And so it's an interesting question. But everybody went over to 360--

[00:48:58.95] And so as soon as you got there, you knew how many days you were going to be there. And everybody kept a calendar. But Nixon in 1968, when he got elected president, said he was going to start phasing out the war. Well, that meant people would were getting maybe a month knocked off, maybe 15 days. Everybody was getting a little bit of time knocked off their tours in Vietnam. And I ended up having like 15 days knocked off mine. So yeah, everybody was over there for a year.

[00:49:34.38] The challenge was how long you let somebody-- the leadership. It seemed to be common knowledge that if you are an officer going to Vietnam, you would command maybe for six months. And then you'd get some nice cushy staff job for six months. And the belief then was that that's the way they wanted it.

[00:50:02.06] The leadership of the Army at that time, all our generals, were folks that were lieutenants and captains in World War II. So our generals felt that maybe you should not be in a leadership position for more than 180 days. 180 days is probably the breaking point that they saw

in World War II, which was a whole different war. But they saw as-- 160 days was probably enough for somebody to be in a leadership position.

[00:50:35.20] And plus, at that time, Westmoreland felt that office-- he needed to get as many leaders trained and officers trained as he could because he felt that this was going to be just a short war. And so he wanted as many officers trained as he could, so let's make it six months command. And so he said six months is good. I'll get more and more people trained because the real enemy is not Vietnam. The real enemy is the Soviet Union.

[00:51:06.97] And so by the time the war starts with the Soviet Union, I'll have all these trained officers after six months. Of course, six months of command was not good for the enlisted Soldiers, I don't think. I don't think it was good for the Soldiers in general that you had somebody only in command six months. They were just-- you were just learning how to do things.

[00:51:29.89] And I was in command for a year so I guess that's why I'm a little prejudiced about that. I thought I was only going to be in six months too. But at the six month point, I was called by the brigade adjutant, and said you're going to have dinner with the general. And this was in January. And I said, oh, well I must be going down there. He's going to tell me what I'm going to do next because my six months would be up.

[00:51:57.70] And so I went there to have-- number one, I didn't even know the general had his own mess, but he did. He had a mess down there. And had a nice dinner. And then at the end of dinner, he told me that he wanted me to stay on for an additional six months. Of course, he didn't tell me that LAM SON 719 and DEWEY CANYON II were going to be happening within the next two weeks.

[00:52:20.20] But that's the real reason he wanted me to stay on. He wanted somebody with experience to build that road for him because he was told by other people at the corps-- at the corps level, that a road could not be built through the mountains. And so he said he could get it done. And so he wanted an experienced officer.

[00:52:43.75] I think, overall, I think, you talk to any officer, I think they'd probably tell you that it was probably a mistake to just leave people in for six months at a time. When it came time for coming home, I was turning over the company. I turned it over to another captain and flew from Quang Tri down to Tan Son Nhut again. That's where I was flying out of.

[00:53:15.11] And took the urine test that we all had to take. And they told us that once you get off in Seattle-- I flew into Seattle again-- once you get off the airplane, you should probably change into civilian clothes because there's been some not favorable reaction to people coming home from Vietnam. And it was true. You could see it all around you. You could see how the whole country was blaming the Soldier and not the country for the war.

[00:54:01.62] And so everybody came home and did not feel very comfortable and did not feel comfortable talking about it either. So I came home. I was fortunate. I came home. I did not have to move into another military position. I went on to grad school because I was already selected to

go back and teach at West Point. They wanted me to get a graduate degree, a master's degree, before I went back to teach.

[00:54:28.34] So I went to school and then went right to West Point. So I was kind of insulated. I did not have to go and live in that. But I could see it when I was on the campus that I was at. And this was a very conservative campus. It was Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. But even there, you could hear the mumblings and the grumblings of no respect for what the Soldiers had gone through. And of course, every Vietnam veteran has sworn not to let that happen again.

[00:55:07.40] ANDREW RINGLEE: Can you talk about how West Point had changed from when you were a student there to when you were an instructor there?

[00:55:15.14] GEORGE SHOENER: Yeah. Well, let me tell you, the first thing, the biggest change was when I left and that was bringing women to the Academy. That was in 1976. I was teaching from '73 to '76. So when I was there, not a lot had changed. The war ended in '75, so there were still some people going to Vietnam. Some graduates were still going to Vietnam.

[00:55:40.97] And of course, the young cadets were all interested to hear your war stories about what you did and how you did things, but they were-- the war was winding down, so they didn't really want to know too much about what was going on. It's changed a lot since though. I mean, I was just up for my 50th reunion, what two weeks ago? Yeah, two weeks ago. And it's changed a lot. The academics changed.

[00:56:13.49] When I graduated, everybody was an engineer. You had one elective. I had one elective my junior year and one elective my senior year. Now they can go into liberal arts. They can go into engineering. They can go into science. They can go medical. I mean, there's all kinds of options now. So the whole educational program has changed.

[00:56:35.30] How much has the training of the cadets been with regard to their military training? It seems to me they're still doing the same stuff. So I mean, they're still getting the officer ready to lead the enlisted Soldiers, making sure they're knowledgeable about all the equipment, and the tactics that will keep them alive in the combat situations. So I think that has not changed.

[00:57:03.29] The emphasis is still there to graduate a leader with character and education. So I think it's still there. And I think I'm still proud of what they're doing up there. Of course, the classes are bigger. And the females are in the class now. The females have been very successful. Actually, I think the last commandant was a female. The current dean is a female.

[00:57:34.51] ANDREW RINGLEE: How did the Army change after Vietnam? Because you stayed in, correct?

[00:57:38.23] GEORGE SHOENER: Yes, I did. Yes, I did. Well, the big change was no more draft. And so you ended up bringing Soldiers in that wanted to be there in 90% of the cases. They wanted to be. They enlisted. So they joined up because they wanted to be there. That way,

if you got somebody that wants to be there, to mold them into the Soldier that you want them to be is a lot easier than molding someone who is not.

[00:58:04.75] So I think you have less drug problems. You have less of what is maybe impacting the civilian community. You have less of that happening in the military. So I felt the Soldiers were good. Discipline was a lot easier. I think the drug problems had disappeared. So I thought it was all very favorable.

[00:58:34.94] I think, of course, with the war winding down also, promotions got slower. So people that-- when I went in, I was a second lieutenant one year, a first lieutenant one year, and then I was a-- boom, I was a captain. Now I think it takes like seven or-- six or seven years to get promoted to captain. So promotions are slower throughout the whole military, the enlisted and the officer ranks.

[00:59:00.67] I think we're producing good officers, and we're producing good Soldiers. I think having the community supporting the Soldier the way they do now is just wonderful. I think it's just wonderful. And in the past 10 years, I've had-- when I wear my hat, I'm a Vietnam vet or people know I'm a vet, it's welcome home, thank you for your service. And that never happened in the '70s, never.

[00:59:39.67] ANDREW RINGLEE: Did you maintain contact with the men that you served with in Vietnam?

[00:59:43.69] GEORGE SHOENER: Yes, I do. Actually, I'm the treasurer for the Society of the 5th Division. So I am the treasurer for-- we get together once a year. Our reunion this year is in Norfolk, Virginia. Last year was in Fort Benning, Georgia. And we go someplace new every year. And in two years, it's going to be in San Diego.

[01:00:04.27] So yeah, I do stay in touch. Some of them are enlisted. Within the last two weeks, thanks to my wife, I found on Facebook two lieutenants I served with. One is the lieutenant that was held captive by the South Vietnamese when he pulled a bridge out of the water, Lieutenant Murayama, ran into him. And the other one was the lieutenant that was in charge of a platoon that built the road on LAM SON 719, DEWEY CANYON II.

[01:00:38.27] And I'm hoping-- I just recently contacted them, but one lives close to my hometown. I'm originally from Scranton, Pennsylvania. And so we're going up there in September, I believe, and we're going to-- I'm going to try and make sure that we get together and talk a little bit about-- . That lieutenant, the two people that were killed in LAM SON 719 were his.

[01:01:03.38] And then later on, seven were killed in a bunker up at C2. There were 31 casualties when a rocket hit a bunker up along the DMZ at C2. And when that bunker collapsed, 31 people were killed. And 7 of them were from his platoon or from my company. And so all the casualties from my company while I was in Vietnam were from his platoon.

[01:01:38.64] ANDREW RINGLEE: Did your experiences in Vietnam change or affect the way that you think of Soldiers coming off the battlefields in Iraq and Afghanistan today?

[01:01:47.65] GEORGE SHOENER: Now, I think these guys are just wonderful. I think-- And I thought the guys I served with were wonderful. So I think both completely different wars, completely different you know-- when I look at the draftees that served in Vietnam, I mean, those guys didn't even have to be there. But once they were selected by their country to say you need to serve your country, they did well.

[01:02:16.90] And so yeah, I think the ones coming off now, I think they're better trained. Our guys, I think, we threw them into the fire back in Vietnam because we did not train them as well as the ones that are trained now. We sent people to combat as individuals in Vietnam. Now they send them as units, which is so much smarter. And they don't have the six-month command crap either.

[01:02:44.91] So they're over there with a leader that trained them in the United States, that took them into combat, and comes back home with them. And that's that same leader. That's got to mean so much to them too. But from what I've seen of the people serving in Iraq and Afghanistan, these are top notch Soldiers. And of course, a lot of that change came I think with Norman Schwarzkopf when he was commander during the 1990s. And he made a big difference. He was one of my professors when I was a student at West Point.

[01:03:21.25] ANDREW RINGLEE: How was he as a professor?

[01:03:22.45] GEORGE SHOENER: He was good. He was a bachelor up then-- back then. And lots of stories going around about all the girls he dated while he was a bachelor. He was quite the bachelor. But he was a good instructor too, very good instructor.

[01:03:44.77] GEORGE SHOENER: The leadership-- the junior leadership, which was what was leading the Army in the '90s, I mean that's like Schwarzkopf was a major back in-- during Vietnam and became the four-star general which was leading our forces. I think he learned a lot of good lessons while he was over there. And I think he applied them all while he was in charge. And I think they've stuck. And so I think-- and I think the general population has learned a lot of lessons too.

[01:04:27.06] GEORGE SHOENER: There's 20 of my classmates on the Wall. So we try to recognize them every time we get together. So this was our 50th reunion. So every five years, we try and have some type of a service at the Wall for my 20 classmates. And this last year, we recognized them at Fort Benning as opposed to at the Wall. And so it's a moving experience each time I go there.

[01:04:56.72] This past year, every five years, if you're not aware of it-- well, you know, they read the names on the Wall, at the Wall, every five years. So I went over and read names in the pouring rain on a Thursday night. And my wife she supported me. And went with me also. Very moving. As was the Wall coming here to Easton, I thought that was a very good move for the people here, the VFW and the VVA, to arrange to have the Wall brought here to Easton.

[01:05:36.56] GEORGE SHOENER: I think it's worked very well. Actually, my wife is a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution. She is the one that actually brought the commemoration here to Easton the first time. And we did it on March 29 of last year. And she got with Kenley Timms from the VFW. And we organized to have an event held on March 29, which was the day that the last American Soldier left Vietnam, other than the embassy guards.

[01:06:10.49] So we had a-- she arranged to have the event there. I was the speaker. And so we had the event there. And so we pinned-- I don't know-- maybe 50 or 60 people that had not heard of the commemoration, was not aware of the pin. And so she did that. We did that at that ceremony. So that was very nice. And of course, they have another pinning ceremonies over here.

[01:06:42.61] Last year, the group from my company, A Company, 7th Engineers in Vietnam, it seemed like every time we had these 5th Division reunions, we had them on the East Coast. So last year, one of the guys from A Company, 7th Engineers decided let's try and have something on the West Coast. So we had something in Las Vegas.

[01:07:07.07] So we met in Las Vegas. And there were probably 20 of us there on the-- I don't remember what floor-- but let's just say the 20th floor of Harrah's. Those 19 guys lined up on the hallway. One of the guys from our company knew how to play the bagpipes. And he played the bagpipes. And I went down and pinned those 19 guys. I gave the pin to those 19 guys.