

## Sorley, Lewis US Army

[00:00:14.04] LEWIS SORLEY: I was born at West Point, New York, 3d of August 1934. My father was on the faculty there teaching military art and engineering. My father was a West Point graduate class of 1924. My grandfather, also a West Point graduate class of 1891. So essentially, I went into the family business.

[00:00:32.59] MARK FRANKLIN: Is that home for you?

[00:00:33.98] LEWIS SORLEY: Well, not really. I mean, that is my place of birth, but we moved away before I was even one year old. And like most Army brats, I grew up moving from place to place to place. But I spent a lot of time in two pieces in San Antonio, Texas, and had very happy times there, and that's what I consider my hometown.

[00:00:53.64] My mother, sister, and I lived there while my father was gone quite a long time in World War II. So I went all through a great little grammar school there. And then after the Second War, my parents divorced and my mother and sister and I went back to San Antonio, and I went to a great little high school there called Texas Military Institute. So I still have lots of friends in San Antonio. I had happy times there. And so if I have a nominal hometown, that's probably it.

[00:01:27.35] MARK FRANKLIN: What was it like growing up as the son of a military officer during that time?

[00:01:31.88] LEWIS SORLEY: I loved it. We moved every two or three years and so on, you know what that's like, and that was fine with me. I went to three first grades. I didn't know any better, as they say. Go here, go there, well, sure. And other kids are coming and going all the time.

[00:01:51.51] And in the little grammar school, which was just outside the back gate of Fort Sam Houston, where our parents had been stationed before they went off to war, I would say two thirds of the kids were Army brats. And one of my friends there counted up one time, and we had something like 23 states represented in this little school and so on.

[00:02:17.36] I do think I was very lucky to be in one high school for the last three years. If you have to move during high school-- and I did it to one of my kids, so I'm very sorry-- you lose out on a lot of leadership opportunities. You know how that is. But I wouldn't take anything for the way I grew up. I loved it.

[00:02:35.27] MARK FRANKLIN: As you were getting older, what was your sense of the war in Vietnam?

[00:02:38.71] LEWIS SORLEY: Well, I now know from scholarly research and so on that our involvement of the war, you can get an argument in any bar as to when it started, but probably in the mid-'50s So I'm a cadet at that time. We were more aware of the Korean War, which is still

going on when we are cadets. And I graduated from West Point in 1956, so that was very early on. We were not aware of Vietnam at all.

[00:03:06.13] Most of us went to Europe for our initial assignments. That was a big deal. I was in an armored cavalry regiment that patrolled the Czech border, an operational mission, a real one, not training at all. And we were fully engrossed in that. We didn't have much time to think about anything else. But it was a great first assignment.

[00:03:26.53] MARK FRANKLIN: You have a long lineage of serving in the military in your family. Is that what led you to seek an appointment to West Point?

[00:03:33.83] LEWIS SORLEY: Never thought of anything else. I cannot remember when that was not my aspiration. I began-- that's all I ever wanted to do.

[00:03:41.01] MARK FRANKLIN: How old were you when you went to Vietnam?

[00:03:43.26] LEWIS SORLEY: Almost 32. I went in the end of June of 1966, and I was 32 in early August. Before I left to go to Vietnam, I went to call on my grandfather. My grandfather, as I told you, was the class of 1891 West Point, and he retired as a full colonel after 40 years of service. Forty years of service. And he lived to be 99 years of age.

[00:04:13.97] And so while he was never the oldest living graduate of West Point, he was, on several occasions, the oldest one who could make it to the alumni activities at graduation week each year. And he got to place the wreath in front of the Statue of Colonel Thayer and so on. And I have a wonderful picture of my grandfather, my father, me, and also my uncle, who was the class of 1919 West Point. The four of us together.

[00:04:42.47] So my grandfather and I became very good friends because he lasted long enough that I could know him when I'm a grown up and so on. So he has had to move to a nursing home in his 99th year because he-- I think he had a circulatory problem in his foot and he couldn't walk as well. And he liked to walk every day. He lived next to the National Zoo in Washington in a big apartment building there, and he walked into the zoo every day and so on.

[00:05:10.50] He was really a great guy. I went to tell him goodbye. I probably spent a half hour with him, and I left the next day or the day after that. And I feel, in retrospect, that when I told him goodbye, we both knew we were not going to see one another again. So that happens. That turns out to be the case. I arrive in Vietnam around the 20th of June, and he dies about that same date in August, about two months after I leave.

[00:05:46.26] The reason I'm telling you this story is that's when I decided that the Army, a big bureaucracy, still had a heart. I'm an obscure major, and I get a personal TWX, a cable, from the adjutant general of the Army telling me about my grandfather's death. Well, that was because of his prominence, not mine. But nevertheless, I've never forgotten that, and I still have the cable. And I appreciated that a great deal.

[00:06:14.40] For about 15 minutes, I thought about whether I should ask for emergency leave and go home for his funeral. And I thought, no, he'd want me to stay here. Even now, a staff weenie, I'm still theoretically at war and so on. So I didn't go.

[00:06:28.05] But my sister went. She wrote me about a 32-page handwritten letter telling me every detail, every horse, every bugler, every-- anyway, probably better than being there. And I think I still have that letter, too. Yeah. So that was good.

[00:06:49.21] LEWIS SORLEY: You could talk all afternoon about that, but I'll make it as short as possible. West Point in our day, class of '56, so we were there for four years, '52 to '56, was much different than it is now. There was one curriculum, and everyone took the same curriculum, all four years, with only one exception. There were five foreign languages taught and you got one of them and only a part of the class got each of those languages.

[00:07:17.02] There were a lot of advantages to that. We had a common base of knowledge and a common meeting ground, if you will, for intellectual purposes. Later, when I was back on the faculty, I looked at the 300 or 400 officers assigned there, most of whom, then, were still West Pointers, that's not the case anymore, I think, and they had been with that background we had.

[00:07:45.58] They had been to every graduate school of any importance in America and probably most in the world. You name it, Caltech, Chicago, MIT, whatever you want to say. So I thought that was a pretty good basis for the beginning of your formal college and graduate level education.

[00:08:07.34] Now, it's all changed now, as you probably know. Others can talk about that better than I. But they have majors now. and if they're doing any better, I doubt it because we did pretty well.

[00:08:21.78] MARK FRANKLIN: So after graduating West Point, receiving your commission, you went to Armor Basic?

[00:08:27.59] LEWIS SORLEY: Sure.

[00:08:28.19] MARK FRANKLIN: Talk a little bit about the armor basic school.

[00:08:31.01] LEWIS SORLEY: Well, probably one of the most exciting events of cadet life, the whole four years, was the night of branch drawings. And these days it's done with punch cards or something you do on a database. Not then. Everybody goes to the biggest lecture hall. This is the whole first class. We were graduating 480 cadets.

[00:08:55.79] And they have said, there are this many slots for each branch. In those days, the Military Academy and the Naval Academy were still putting one quarter of each class into the Air Force because there was not yet an Air Force academy. So automatically, 120 slots for the Air Force. There were 36 slots for armor.

[00:09:16.40] And so the dean's representative stands up and he reads off the name of the first man in academic standing for the whole four years up to that point. This is a couple of months before graduation. And that fellow stands up and says what his choice is. And a lackey on the blackboard erases the number that were available for what he's chosen and puts one number fewer on there, and so you could see them going away.

[00:09:43.27] Well, cadets, we had taken straw polls, so we all knew where the break points were about to go. And if you were near one of those, you're holding your breath and so on. Well, I was lucky. I was high enough in the class that when it was my turn to choose, all the branches were still available. But in those days, there were not very many branches offered. Five branches in the Army plus the Air Force.

[00:10:05.49] And the tradition is that the most highly ranked in academic standing chose corps of engineers. My father was corps of engineers. My grandfather was infantry. They were both giving me a lot of advice as to what branch I should choose, so I went armor. And so this was a whole lot of fun.

[00:10:26.22] And then when that's over, the people who have chosen the different branches go to separate venues, and there they have the same ranking standing to choose their first assignment. So I chose the 2d Armored Cavalry Regiment, which was then at Fort Meade, Maryland, but it was going to take part in a program of that day called gyroscope.

[00:10:49.41] Which meant the whole regiment was going to go to Germany, where the 3d Armored Cavalry Regiment was, and replace them, and the 3d was going to come back to Fort Meade and take over our billets and everything there.

[00:11:00.30] So first, we do the stuff you said. We go to the basic officer's course at Fort Knox. We go to airborne and jumpmaster training at Fort Benning. And then some guys go to Ranger School and others go right to their units. Since this unit was about to deploy, we went right to our unit and served there for more than three years. That was a wonderful first assignment for me, I think for everybody.

[00:11:26.43] MARK FRANKLIN: Talk a little bit about the armor basic course at Fort Knox.

[00:11:29.82] LEWIS SORLEY: What to say about that? I think the first thing I'd say is that everybody enjoyed it. We were happy to be in armor. Armor went out fairly high up in the class, and so the people that got into armor were happy about that. We all lived in this, I think, seven-story high apartment building. What was that called? I'll try to think of it.

[00:11:58.88] And so we had a lot of interaction. We carpooled back and forth to work. The big scandal was the New Garden Apartments, that's what it was called, had no central air conditioning. So most people bought a window air conditioner.

[00:12:14.45] And somebody who was putting one in on the fourth floor, I believe, let it get away from him, and it took out the ones on the third floor and the second floor to the great

dismay of the people living there who came and offered a lot of guidance to this fellow who had let his get away. So there were those kinds of funny things.

[00:12:34.58] The course was good. It's stuff we needed to know. We knew we needed to know it. We really wanted to know it. So everybody took it very seriously, but didn't take ourselves too seriously. The highlight of the course, maybe, was this thing called the tankers night ride. And you have a Jeep and a driver and two officers go as a team. So I don't know, there must have been a couple hundred teams. Where they got all those Jeeps, who knows.

[00:13:02.61] And you'd go from station to station and there'd be a problem for you to solve as a team, the two of you. And so you were graded on how you did on each of those stations and the total time elapsed. And maybe you take three or four hours to go through the whole thing.

[00:13:16.82] And then we all get back. Naturally, we need to have a beer and talk about our experiences and so on. It was a great time. Everybody there was well-motivated and eager to get to their units. I have a lot of good things in memory about that time.

[00:13:36.17] LEWIS SORLEY: I went in June of 1966. I had just finished three years on the faculty at West Point, and, I guess, probably had a couple of weeks leave to settle my family where they were going to stay, and then headed out. The big build up of sending American units and forces there had started about a year before I went.

[00:14:00.05] I now know from study and so on, I didn't necessarily know all these things then, the first units that went out went out in the spring of '65, I think in March, a couple of Marine battalions in May, the 173d Airborne from Okinawa in July, division level forces. So I went as a - a lot of the people from West Point faculty went at the same time I did. Maybe a hundred, including my two classmates who had been in the department with me.

[00:14:33.95] And we went as individual replacements. So we were going to go to an existing unit that's on the ground there. I went to the tank battalion of the 25th Infantry Division. And the division had been separated when it arrived about a year earlier, with most of them going into III Corps region where Saigon is to a place called Cu Chi, but one brigade and the tank battalion going into what's called the Central Highlands.

[00:15:06.06] So that's where I was eventually going to go. First I had to suffer a little staff duty. I was sent to what was called I Field Force Vietnam, which was headquartered in a coastal city called Nha Trang. And I really actually had a really good experience there, although I wanted to go to a troop unit. The first thing I did when I got there was to put in a request to go to a troop unit.

[00:15:36.35] And then the commanding general had an interview with every officer that came in. And he was a wonderful officer. His name was General Larsen, Lieutenant General. His nickname was Swede Larsen. I've forgotten what his real name was. He was a really fine officer, and he made it his business to know everybody that worked for him.

[00:15:57.13] So I told him in my initial interview that I'd like to go to a troop unit. And he was very nice about it. He said, well, I need to get some work out of you first, but I will make sure that before you leave here you get that opportunity. So I stayed in this headquarters for I think four months, and then went out to a tank battalion for the last eight months.

[00:16:17.75] MARK FRANKLIN: Let's go back to when you first arrived in Vietnam. Where did you arrive, and how did you get there?

[00:16:25.01] LEWIS SORLEY: I think it was like most people who went as individual replacements. The units went probably differently. We were all filtered into Travis Air Force Base in California, and we were manifested on some given flight, it's flight number and time, get on that. I think we stopped maybe a couple of times for refueling stops on the way. I'm not quite sure where. Maybe Okinawa was one of them. And we wound up at Tan Son Nhut Air Base in Saigon.

[00:16:56.93] Which was a little bit interesting because you didn't know quite how to act when you get off the airplane. We're in a combat zone now, we realize that, but we're not sure how secure the-- are we supposed to do a low crawl to the terminal, or can we walk along like normal people? So nobody wanted to make a fool of themselves, right?

[00:17:17.49] So we look around. Well, the ground crew is not seeming to be too concerned, so we walk. We may hunch down a little bit. We walk over to the terminal, and they put us on buses, and they take us to a processing place. I'm not sure of this. It might have been called Camp Alpha. Anyway, you could easily find that out because I think that's where everybody was filtered through.

[00:17:40.16] And they would give you a bunk in a tent or some kind of a small building maybe, and you wait to get your orders. And I think I was just there overnight, and the next day I went out to the-- back out to the airfield and caught an in-country flight up to Nha Trang, and somebody met me there and so on. So that was relatively painless.

[00:18:06.27] I was assigned to the G3 section of I Field Force Vietnam as a planner. And I was a major by this time. I think I'd been a major about a year. And that turned out to be a very interesting assignment, even though, as I've told you, I'm eager to get to a troop unit.

[00:18:27.00] After I had established myself a little bit, I got an assignment that turned out to be unique but I didn't know it at the time. I was to draft the plan for the first use of a U.S. battalion full-time as its major job in support of a Vietnamese pacification effort in a given province.

[00:18:48.12] And-- which I did. Not without some difficulty. Because in the plan, I specified, for example, that this battalion would have its headquarters at a given place, which I chose because I felt that was the best place for it to be given the pacification mission.

[00:19:02.85] MARK FRANKLIN: This is after your G3 duty?

[00:19:05.25] LEWIS SORLEY: No. This is during the G3 duty. I'm a planner now, and this is--

[00:19:08.16] MARK FRANKLIN: Oh, G3 planner. So this is actually good training for you?

[00:19:11.19] LEWIS SORLEY: Well, no training involved. I'm now going to show whether I've learned anything up to this point. And, of course, I haven't been to Leavenworth or anything yet. And, in fact, these guys complained.

[00:19:21.78] The commander and I guess the operations officer of the battalion complained that in the order that I drafted for General Larsen to issue them, it said where they're going to put their headquarters. And they said, that's not the way it was told us at Leavenworth. We decide. I said, I haven't been to Leavenworth. Sorry. And General Larsen backed me.

[00:19:43.78] So he later gave me a Legion of Merit for that. And I was happy about that because as I later learned from scholarly research and writing and so on, Westmoreland was not the slightest bit interested in pacification, and he was the overall commander then, General Westmoreland. But General Larsen was. And if we'd had General Larsen in charge, we would have had a different story.

[00:20:10.18] Anyway, I think I spent four months there, maybe five. I got there in June, and I went up to the tank battalion in early December. So however that works out.

[00:20:22.56] MARK FRANKLIN: When you first arrived in Vietnam, was it daytime or nighttime? Do you remember?

[00:20:27.25] LEWIS SORLEY: I'm pretty sure it was daytime.

[00:20:28.78] MARK FRANKLIN: What were your first impressions? And by that I mean sights, smells. I know you were wondering, how do I get from here to the terminal, but what was your first impression getting off the aircraft?

[00:20:37.42] LEWIS SORLEY: We really didn't have any because you get off the airplane, you go into the terminal, they herd you through there like cattle, and then they put you on these buses and the buses have grenade screens across the windows, so you can't see out very well.

[00:20:54.93] They drive you to this Camp Alpha, which looks like any bunch of tents you ever saw anywhere, or maybe little temporary buildings. I can't recall if we were still in tents or not. And you got a bunk there and they say, this is where you get the chow, and there's where the latrines are. And you just wait there until-- and I think I only waited there overnight, as I said.

[00:21:18.18] Next day somebody comes, they hand you some orders, and it says, be here, be there. And went back out to the airfield and got on a smaller aircraft and went-- flew to Nha Trang. So just driving through the streets and so on, you really didn't get any chance at all. And because of my assignments, I never did get too much of that.

[00:21:42.93] And Nha Trang was a nice small city. A beautiful place right on the coast. I always thought that after the war was over, that would become one of the great resort cities of Asia. It

had everything. It had a beautiful ocean, had all kinds of nice things. But because of politics and other things, that has never really happened. So there we-- it was just like living in any city.

[00:22:11.28] We carried guns, but we don't use them. We don't have any need to use them. We go to work. It's like, you come here, we go to work in the morning, we go eat lunch somewhere, go back home after work. We lived in little houses that they had rented from the Vietnamese. Three, four people to a room, bunk beds. Nothing extraordinary about it.

[00:22:39.58] I did travel quite a bit when I was doing that planning that I told you about for the use of the U.S. forces in support of pacification. I went up to I Corp and looked at what the Marines were doing. I went down to III and IV Corps and looked at some units there. So that was good.

[00:22:54.28] But most people will talk about Saigon. I got to Saigon three times for a day each, or part of a day each. And I had very interesting times there, but that's minuscule little bit of exposure on which to answer your question.

[00:23:16.57] MARK FRANKLIN: You did the planning for a U.S. battalion in support of a Vietnamese military unit doing pacification. Did I get that right?

[00:23:24.24] LEWIS SORLEY: In support of the entire Vietnamese organization and structure in a province to implement the pacification program.

[00:23:37.08] MARK FRANKLIN: How would they execute that? How would that battalion execute that?

[00:23:40.87] LEWIS SORLEY: Well, it's not a battalion. Now, that's what I'm trying to tell you. It's the whole lash-up of the governmental apparatus within a given province.

[00:23:47.74] So you've got a province chief, you've got national police, you've got Vietnamese military, ARVN, ARVN is the acronym for Army of Vietnam, you have territorial forces, which they usually refer to as RF and PF, regional forces, they come under the province chief, popular forces, they come under the district chief.

[00:24:11.67] The province is like a state would be to us. The districts would be like counties would be to us. And then they have all the ministries. The ministry of interior. The people who handle resources. The people who are dealing with refugee problems. It's the whole governmental apparatus there.

[00:24:31.48] And the key thing that military forces are trying to do here, along with the national police, are to root out this covert infrastructure that the enemy has put in place all throughout South Vietnam, and they use terror and coercion to keep the populace under Communist control.

[00:24:53.63] And until you-- first you've got to find out who they are, and then where they are, and then how to deal with them. And so this is the beginning of that. This never really took off on any countrywide or national government level until later when Ambassador Bunker is our



ambassador there, when Bill Colby is there in charge of what was called CORDS. I think that stands for Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support.

[00:25:22.03] But that's support, so this is the U.S. supporting a Vietnamese effort. And that's, of course, when General Abrams is there, too. And Abrams and Bunker and Colby say, you've got to treat this as one war, one war. Not just thrash out around out in the deep jungle with main force units. You've got to deal with pacification, you've got to build up South Vietnam's own forces, and then you've got to conduct much different and better thought-through military operations as well.

[00:25:54.83] Now, I knew none of that stuff, then, right? I'm just a non-Leavenworth graduate trying to implement what I hear General Larsen saying he wants to do. And I have to say I was very lucky to get that assignment, and I really enjoyed it a lot. And later on, that fitted in pretty well with what was tried to be done countrywide.

[00:26:24.80] I did get to Saigon for parts of three days, separate times. And I don't recall what was the reason for going here, but you asked me about impressions that I got and so on. And Saigon was a vibrant city. Choked with traffic. The war has been on for several years by the time I get there now in '66, this is the latter part of '66.

[00:26:56.38] And there are a lot of American GIs there. The streets are full of cyclos, these are things almost like rickshaws, but they're motorized and people are driving around in those, and bicycles everywhere, and small cars, and you cross any street at your peril and so on.

[00:27:18.80] So I'm there for some reason, and I have a couple of hours to myself. Whatever I was doing in the next thing was two hours away. And I happened to be near the zoo. So I think, I'll just go see what the Saigon Zoo looks like. And at the entrance, I met two little girls. I will say they were twelve and ten. They might have been sisters.

[00:27:44.48] And they say to me in not too bad English, we show you every animal. We show you the Dumbo, we show you the-- and they knew all the Disney names for the animals, right? And I said, sure. So I hire them on. And they are charming little girls. And they do. They show me all the animals and so on.

[00:28:04.97] And, of course, I grossly overpay them and happily so. Well, that was maybe my happiest experience in the whole year in Vietnam. I remember those little girls very fondly. I hope they got through it OK. Yeah.

[00:28:20.71] MARK FRANKLIN: Let's talk about now you move up to the tank unit. Now you've got your troop assignment. What were your initial duties there?

[00:28:29.86] LEWIS SORLEY: I had been up to be interviewed. I put in that paper I told you about, and in due course, I was offered-- I went up to be interviewed to be the XO, the executive officer, second in command, if you will, of the 1st Battalion, 69th Armor, which was the tank battalion of the 25th Infantry Division.

[00:28:49.05] And it was located in the Central Highlands in field positions, but the nearest place of any consequence was a city called Pleiku. So this is in the II Corps Tactical Zone, as the Vietnamese would have it. And so then I was chosen for the job after the interview.

[00:29:10.91] My initial arrival there was possibly worth mentioning. It was a real long day. I had to do whatever I needed to do to disconnect from my job in Nha Trang, turn in my gear that I'd hired there and so on. Take a flight, probably a flight to Pleiku, then I think a helicopter or a Jeep.

[00:29:35.64] And I finally wind up at the field position where the battalion headquarters is located, and it's after dark. And so I get out of the Jeep and the first GI I encounter, I asked him if he knows where I can find the battalion commander. And he said, oh, yes, sir. He's right over there. And he points to a place where a Jeep is, engines running, and the headlights on, and several people are on their hands and knees in front of the headlights doing something.

[00:30:03.62] So I go over. And I know who the battalion commander is because I'd been there to be interviewed. And I see him there. They're skinning a tiger. So I report and I said, Sir, Major Sorley reporting for duty. And he said, good, grab a paw. So that was my first duty here that, so help skin this tiger.

[00:30:24.15] Well, that's not exactly what I had expected. But two things happened. I should explain that the tiger, I guess, it turns out that one of the tank commanders-- a platoon of tanks had been moving along a jungle trail. And the second or third tank in line, the tank commander was a sergeant. I remember him well, Sergeant Ferneyhough, who was a country boy. A good tank commander.

[00:30:49.86] And he had happened to look off to his left, and he saw a tiger standing there. And without a second thought, he takes his pistol from his shoulder holster and goes, bang, and with one shot drops the tiger in its tracks. Now, I don't know what you think about that, but I'll have to say, whatever else it was, it was a remarkable feat of marksmanship. So they stop.

[00:31:11.32] And then right away, Ferneyhough thinks, oh-oh, maybe I shouldn't have done that. But they put the tiger on the front slope of his tank, their headlights and so on there so they can hang him there, and they drive back to the base camp. And the battalion commander-- not the base camp, the forward command post where I am now-- have reported.

[00:31:32.87] And the battalion commander was a fellow named Colonel Clark, an older fellow. I'll tell you something about him in a minute, if you like. And he was from Montana. And when he saw this tiger, he became very excited, and he offered Ferneyhough 50 bucks for the tiger. Well, Ferneyhough is immensely relieved. He's off the hook now. The colonel is happy we got this tiger, so he sells the tiger to him and so on.

[00:32:00.85] So that's how-- so one of my first jobs the next day, I'm the new executive officer, and the old one had already gone. We didn't have any overlap. I don't know how long he'd been gone. One of my new-- first things was to ask around all the mess halls if they can let us have

any salt because the colonel wants to pack up this tiger skin in salt and send it to his taxidermist back in Montana.

[00:32:24.13] Well, I'm a little uneasy about putting a skinned tiger into the APO, the Army postal system. I know a lot of bad stuff's been mailed over the years, but I don't know if they're-- so we didn't want it to leak, so we got all the plastic we could and so on. Later, I wrote to the colonel and asked him if it got back, but I'm sorry to say he never responded, so I don't know what happened there.

[00:32:57.11] LEWIS SORLEY: We were in the field. The colonel had a little hooch built in the back of a truck that he lived in and used for an office, too. I had a little pyramidal tent, I think that's the right term for him, and a cot, perfectly OK.

[00:33:19.20] I should tell you this, too, I got off to a real good start in the battalion because after that very long day I told you about, and then staying up with the tiger skin and all of that, by the time I got to bed, I was really bushed, and I fell into a deep sleep. And I had been introduced to my driver. I told my driver to wake me up at 5:30, which he did.

[00:33:43.80] And it turns out that at 2:30, they'd had a mortar attack, and I had not heard anything about that. And later, my driver said that the troops said, wow, that new exec is pretty cool. They mortared us his first night there, and he didn't even wake up. So that was thanks to exhaustion, no other purpose.

[00:34:02.91] MARK FRANKLIN: You set a good impression.

[00:34:03.97] LEWIS SORLEY: Yeah, that's right. We got off to a good start. I had a very satisfying tour there in the tank battalion.

[00:34:11.14] MARK FRANKLIN: How about the food? What was the food like out in the field?

[00:34:14.38] LEWIS SORLEY: We had a little tent. I think these general purpose tents came in sizes. This might--

[00:34:22.02] MARK FRANKLIN: Small, medium, and large.

[00:34:22.29] LEWIS SORLEY: --be a GP-- yeah, this might have been a GP, General Purpose, small or medium.

[00:34:27.43] MARK FRANKLIN: Yeah.

[00:34:28.55] LEWIS SORLEY: And we had some kind of table in there, and half a dozen people would eat in there at one time. And we had cooked food most of the time. I don't remember eating C-rations there unless we were going somewhere, and no chance to cook, and so on. I think we ate pretty well during that time.

[00:34:57.63] In a tank battalion, we had a very easy war. We had a very easy war. The living conditions were not bad. We were so powerful with the armament that we had and so on that where we went, essentially, the enemy went away until we went someplace else. And we did take some casualties and we did have some vehicle damage, but it's mostly from mines or mortar attacks, not direct confrontation, face-to-face.

[00:35:29.16] One of our Soldiers did win a Medal of Honor, and we're very proud of him, and he deserved it, but that was a special circumstance. His platoon was with a Korean ROK unit, R-O-K, Republic of Korea unit, and they got attacked by a much larger force during a long night. And he performed wonderfully and really deserved that.

[00:35:56.20] But day to day, we had two missions, really. One was to keep open the main supply route from the coast, where all the goods came in, to the units that were in the highlands. That was called Route 19 East, and our job was to keep it open. And it was never closed the whole time I was there except once by our fault, which I'll tell you. So we performed that mission very well.

[00:36:22.55] And then our secondary mission was to be prepared to go to the assistance of any of the small border camps if they got attacked and in trouble, and I'll tell you a story of one time about that, if you'd like.

[00:36:39.75] But I have the greatest admiration and sympathy for people in-- especially in ground infantry units. And the great heroes of the war, from my perspective, and I've heard lots of other veterans say similar things, the great heroes of the war were the Dust Off pilots, Dust Off pilots being the medical evacuation pilots. Number one, everybody always mentions them, number one.

[00:37:11.61] Second, the Army nurses. And third, a lot of people will say forward air controllers, because they're out there in these little baby airplanes. They're very exposed and so on. I think it's fair to say that we were sensitive of the fact that we were luckier than most in both respects. One was our living conditions, and two was how powerful we were and therefore how we were able to prevail most places.

[00:37:46.60] LEWIS SORLEY: I was very lonely the four months or so that I spent as a staff officer in Nha Trang. I liked the people I was working with. They were good people, hard-working people, but there wasn't any chit-chat during the day. And lunch might be 15 minutes and so on. We were seriously working hard to try to do what we can.

[00:38:11.35] I did have one friend there. We'd been on the faculty at West Point together. He was in an artillery outfit somewhere else. He was probably in the Field Force Artillery Headquarters. I was in the overall headquarters.

[00:38:24.77] And we found out that at the Special Forces compound-- 5th Special Forces Group was headquartered there in Nha Trang also-- that Sunday nights they had steak night and you could go there, even if you were supposed to be building-- I mean, messing someplace else.

[00:38:43.63] So that was about it. We would try to make that every Sunday night, and that was really my only friend there. I had these professional colleagues. I liked them, as I said. I enjoyed working with them, but it was mostly work.

[00:38:59.86] So when I got up to the tank battalion, it's of course a lot different now. So who do you make friends with? Well, you make friends with Sergeant Major if you have your wits about you. We had a wonderful, wonderful sergeant major.

[00:39:12.21] And the battalion commander, as I mentioned before, was a little bit older for being in that job and so on. And I don't think I could say we ever became friends, but we worked together well. And he told me within the first couple of days that I was there that his big aspiration was to get a Silver Star before he finished his tour, because he thought this was his last chance. He was probably going to go home and retire.

[00:39:42.28] Well, I didn't know what to say about that, so I didn't say anything, but I of course had that in the back of my head. He gave me the responsibility for interviewing all the new officers and noncommissioned officers who came to us. And there was a big turnover while I was-- in the first few months I was there, and for assigning them.

[00:40:05.04] So I got a good chance to get to know each one of them as they came in, and there were a lot of really good people, good sergeants and good young officers, many of whom prospered later, one of whom became the Army's chief of military history, and we stayed in touch all those years.

[00:40:22.52] And then maybe I should tell you this. As I'm sure you know, everybody spending a year there-- the typical tour was a year-- was at some point authorized a five-day R&R, whatever that stands for, Rest and Recreation or whatever, something, and there were a lot of different places that you could go. About six or eight then, and maybe later there were even some more. Some people went to Hawaii and met their wives there. Other people went to one of these other places.

[00:40:57.79] If it was your intention-- I'm being very candid here now. If it was your intention to be faithful to your marital vows while you're on R&R, some discretion and judgment is needed in picking who you're going to go with, because people always try to find one or two friends to go with.

[00:41:18.01] And so I signed up for Hong Kong, and I signed up with one of my West Point classmates who was working somewhere in division headquarters. And then there was a younger West Pointer who was in my battalion, and the three of us went together. And as I said, we were intent on being faithful husbands.

[00:41:39.43] And so we had a lot of fun. We did a lot of sightseeing, we ate a lot of chow, we drank a lot of beer, and I even bought a car. I bought a Mercury Cougar to be delivered to me when I got home, and so that was all great.

[00:41:55.58] So those were friends too, but again, special circumstances, five days together. We're all still in touch. One, we just lost him last month, but so that's about it for friendships, really.

[00:42:16.06] I have to tell you one thing that occurs to me. I know I'm probably jumping all around here, but by the time I'm up in the highlands, it's coming on Christmas, and there's nothing available that would be worth buying and sending home as a gift to anybody. If you were in Saigon or even back in Nha Trang, probably yes, but up in the Central Highlands, no.

[00:42:44.61] So my dear sister, without any prompting for me, perceives this and sends me a package of about ten mail order catalogs that she has chosen from which I can make my choices. So I do. And one of the catalogs is from a specialty butcher somewhere in rural Virginia. And my sister had gone to Sweet Briar College, and I perceived that this was somewhere near there.

[00:43:13.00] So I thought, maybe this is something she would especially like. So I write all my orders and write checks, and I send an order to this company, and I ask them to send my sister a big smoked turkey for Christmas. And now, man, I'm all set.

[00:43:28.91] So it goes on. Maybe it's about the 10th of December. The letter to that specialty butcher comes back, gone out of business, no forwarding address. So now I'm in a panic. The one person I most wanted to please who's made it possible for me to get all these good gifts for everybody, I've got nothing for her. What am I going to do?

[00:43:52.55] So I sit there in my little pyramidal tent there, and I write a letter, Macy's Department Store, New York, New York. That's the only address I had. I don't even know if we had zip codes in those days, but I of course, had no-- and I explained my situation. And I asked them to please send a big smoked turkey to my sister, who lived nearby in New Jersey.

[00:44:15.58] And Christmas comes and goes, and I get nice notes back from my other family members and people that I've sent gifts to. And then I get a-- I forget the sequence, but I get a letter from my sister, and she says, oh thank you, thank you, thank you for the beautiful smoked turkey. It was wonderful and we had it for Christmas, so on. I said, oh thank god, bless Macy's heart.

[00:44:38.19] And then or maybe before, but I get a letter from a person who signs herself as Macy's personal shopper, Macy's Department Store. And she said, dear Major Sorley, your letter came two days before Christmas. Unfortunately, we were all out of smoked turkeys, but if you won't tell anybody, I went across the street to Gimbel's-- that was their major competitor-- and had them send a smoked turkey to your sister.

[00:45:02.99] And so of course, I sent her profuse thanks and so on. And my only regret is that somehow, traipsing around the highlands in the tank battalion, that letter from her got away from me, and I no longer know her name.

[00:45:20.84] Later, I wrote to Macy's. I said, do you have maybe an in-house newsletter? Could you put this in? And if that lady sees it, I hope she'll contact me. And they did do that, but no, it didn't come. Anyhow, that was a wonderful thing that she did for me and--

[00:45:40.47] MARK FRANKLIN: That's a great story.

[00:45:41.52] LEWIS SORLEY: --I was lucky.

[00:45:42.14] MARK FRANKLIN: Did you see or witness any racial tensions or social tensions during your time in Vietnam? And did you make friends with folks from other backgrounds, both socioeconomic or other regions that you might not have made friends with had you not joined the military?

[00:45:56.96] LEWIS SORLEY: Don't forget, I'm born into the Army, right?

[00:45:59.19] MARK FRANKLIN: Yes.

[00:45:59.60] LEWIS SORLEY: I've grown up like this. My friends in grammar school are all other Army brats, and from all backgrounds, and so on. So nothing was different here except that we had maybe more people who were in for a short haul instead of for a career.

[00:46:20.66] But here's an important thing, and I hope other people that you've interviewed have told you the same thing. We hear a lot of talk about the greatest generation. Tom Brokaw applies this to the World War II generation. Well, my father and my uncle were both part of that generation, and I am very proud of that generation, so this is not to denigrate them in any way.

[00:46:42.11] But the fact is-- and the VA can document this for you. The fact is that the greatest generation, so-called, World War II, was two thirds draftees, one third volunteers. The Army that fought the war in Vietnam was just the opposite, two thirds volunteers, only one third draftees. So the popular folk wisdom that this was a conscript Army is wrong.

[00:47:10.81] And so, did I meet any people that I wouldn't have otherwise met? Individually, yes, but in categories, no. And we had no problems, and nor did I know of any at this time. Now, this is from '66 to '67.

[00:47:30.34] From '70 to '72, I commanded a tank battalion in Germany in the latter stages of the Vietnam War, and hell yes, those problems existed in major ways, problems of racial disharmony, problems of indiscipline, problems of drug abuse. Yes, we fought those every day, but no, not in Vietnam, not at the time I was there, so I was lucky there.

[00:47:54.55] MARK FRANKLIN: In the field, did you have any time? And if you did, what did you do for recreational activities?

[00:48:02.65] LEWIS SORLEY: That's a good question. Probably not much time, and there are two things that I remember that were events. One turned out well, and one turned out not well for me but well in other terms. I'll tell you that one first.

[00:48:27.08] I had a good young man as my driver. He was a smart young guy. I know he was going to go back, and go to college, and do well. And so a famous tenor from the Metropolitan Opera named Richard Tucker was coming to Vietnam on a tour, and he was going to put on a performance or whatever in Pleiku.

[00:48:53.49] And the young driver said-- I said, would you like to go to that? And he said he would, and he meant it. And so he and I were going to go to that. I had checked with the colonel. Yeah, that was OK with him. But then when the time came, Tucker was there. We were involved in something. I couldn't go, but I did send-- I sent the driver.

[00:49:14.09] And later on, he came back, and he debriefed me, and he said it was wonderful. He said Tucker sang some arias for them, and then he sang some music as a cantor would do, a Hebrew cantor, which he was, and that was wonderful, too. And he said there were several hundred GIs there, and they gave him a great, appreciative audience.

[00:49:40.76] And that was very good because we had read in Stars and Stripes that Tucker had volunteered to come as a USO performer, and the USO had told him, American GIs are not interested in opera singers. Well, fortunately, his reception was quite different than that implied, and he had paid his own way.

[00:50:01.37] And so I wrote him a letter. Again, I don't have much of an address. Richard Tucker, Metropolitan Opera, New York, New York. And what do you know? Month or two later, here comes a nice letter back from him. I think I still have this one. And he thanked me for my letter, and he said that he got far more from that experience than he ever gave, and it was one of the highlights of his life. So that was really cool.

[00:50:26.07] The other event, it's also an event. Of course, Bob Hope made periodic trips around Christmastime, and he did a show in or around Pleiku somewhere. There was this mountain range there, and I probably shouldn't tell you this, but it looked like this, if you can see, and so on.

[00:50:58.62] MARK FRANKLIN: Yup.

[00:50:59.08] LEWIS SORLEY: And so the GIs called it Titty Mountain. And then when the division came in, and they got a higher-level headquarters and all, that was not thought to be--

[00:51:11.49] MARK FRANKLIN: Appropriate.

[00:51:12.27] LEWIS SORLEY: --appropriate, thank you. And so the word came out that from then on, we would call it Dragon Mountain. OK, all right, so the old guys, of course, knew it by its original name, and the other guys didn't, maybe. But on the side of a hill, Bob Hope-- yeah, we're all here, and Bob Hope's putting on this show. And I did get to go to that.

[00:51:32.45] And he had a formula that was very effective. He would send an advance team, and they would look into some local humor and so on. I remember two things that he said. They had blown up a BOQ-- the enemy had-- in Saigon called the Brinks BOQ not long before this.



[00:51:50.51] And so Bob Hope's opening thing was, a funny thing happened to me on the way in from the airport. I passed my hotel going the other way. Well, that got him off to a good start. And then later on, well, he said these two things. He said, I want to tell you, the American people are behind you, 50 percent. And then he says, you'll be going home soon, but don't worry, you'll be given survival training first. So naturally all the guys liked this a lot.

[00:52:20.29] That was in Christmas of '66. Maybe ten years later, I'm at an academic conference in Cincinnati, and I go back to the hotel, and I'm going to get an elevator, and there's Bob Hope and another guy standing there. They were there for some reason.

[00:52:36.41] So I go up to him, I stick out my hand, and I say, Pleiku, 1966. And he had a big smile, and he says, what were you doing there? And I said, I was sitting on the side of a hill laughing my ass off, thanks to you. Well, that was good. We had a two-minute conversation. And that's--

[00:52:52.08] MARK FRANKLIN: Well, that's great.

[00:52:54.95] LEWIS SORLEY: But those are just events. Other recreation, I've heard about people playing volleyball using combat rules. We didn't do that. We didn't have any place or time to do that. I think a lot of people read when they could. People would send us books. You'd get a box of paperback books to any GI, Vietnam, stuff like that.

[00:53:20.83] That's about it. People took pictures. Most of us had little small cameras that you could get in Hong Kong or something like that. I can't think of any recreation of the kind that you and I would talk about. Nobody played cards. I don't know.

[00:53:38.15] MARK FRANKLIN: Do you have any specific memories of the popular culture of the time-- music, film? You mentioned books from your time in Vietnam that-- say you hear a song today and it takes you back, or you see a movie today and it takes you back?

[00:53:52.52] LEWIS SORLEY: Stars and Stripes got to us usually, but not on the day of publication. Maybe the next day, maybe two days later, we would always get it, and people would save it. If you had Stars and Stripes, you read it. You wouldn't throw it away or something. You'd give it to somebody else, and they'd give it to somebody. So we had some sense of what was going on in the U.S. that way.

[00:54:19.33] When General Abrams came out later, he got a complaint from, I guess the Marine commander up in I Corps, that there was too much news. This was probably on AFN, the Armed Forces Network Radio Network rather than Stars and Stripes, but the same complaint was lodged against Stars and Stripes. There were too much news about dissent back in the United States, and protest movements, and so on.

[00:54:44.29] And Abrams looked into it, and he sent this short little message back to this Marine three-star, and he said, I've looked into your complaint. I'm satisfied that our AFN is covering the domestic news accurately and adequately. Our job is to persevere in the context of

the facts. Take that. So that was-- so that was good. I think we were pretty well-informed about that kind of thing.

[00:55:11.69] I remember on that trip to Hong Kong with my two friends, I told you we were determined to stay straight, and we did. So our days would end up with a nice dinner someplace. And then we'd discovered the very first night that we were there, we were billeted in a hotel called the President, which was on the mainland. Kowloon, I guess, and then there was Hong Kong Island across the Star Ferry, but we were in Kowloon.

[00:55:39.80] And there was another hotel a block away, and they had a disco place. And this was a brand-- we had never heard of disco before, this brand new disco movement. This place was called the Scene. We remember-- we stumbled on it the first night, and people would dance there. And so we made it a routine. Every night, we were there. We would go there about ten o'clock at night, stay a couple of hours, drink a few beers, and go on, and go to bed.

[00:56:06.80] And we discovered San Miguel beer from the Philippines, which we thought was quite good. Now, we're up in the tank battalion in the highlands. You can tell where people served in Vietnam by what beer they had gotten.

[00:56:22.14] If they were in Saigon, they're going to get a Budweiser, or Coors, or something, and San Miguel probably. If you're up where we were, you're going to get Jax or something that should be put back in the moose, and you could tell. Ask guys what beer they drank, you'll know where they served. So we were happy to discover this San Miguel beer.

[00:56:45.26] And there was a young couple that was there every night, an Asian man and probably a Eurasian woman who, they were both likely in their late 20s. Beautiful people, both of them, had danced together magnificently.

[00:57:00.27] It never occurred to me at the time, but now in retrospect, I think maybe they worked for the establishment and they were hired as an attraction, because when they went on the dance floor, a lot of people would just clear it off to watch them dance. It was beautiful.

[00:57:16.44] And a song that I remember-- I shouldn't tell you this either, I know-- was called-- Engelbert Humperdinck, Please Release Me, Please Release Me, Let Me Go. Well, my marriage was in shambles and didn't last much longer than after I went home from Vietnam, and that song had a certain resonance for me. I remember that. I remember that very well.

[00:57:43.80] And then I remember getting to San Francisco and hearing a song. I think this group was called the 5th Dimension, and the song was Up, Up and Away, which was quite nice, and I could probably dredge up a couple of those. So the music of the time that I liked, was interesting, was not protest music at all, Where Have All the Flowers Gone? We all knew these songs, but they didn't resonate with me.

[00:58:15.52] Not only can I say this for myself, but I think I can say it for everybody I knew that was there at the time. We thought what we were doing there was worth doing. We thought we were doing a good job of it. We were proud of ourselves, proud of our young Soldiers, and

proud of being there, of serving when we were asked to serve. So all this other stuff is of a later vintage, I would say.

[00:58:44.61] LEWIS SORLEY: I want to go back to two episodes in the tank battalion that have to do with the mission that we had. I told you that we succeeded in keeping that major highway, the main line of support from Quy Nhon on the coast to the Central Highlands, open the whole time without any interruption except one time when we closed it, and it was very traumatic.

[00:59:11.52] It happened to be on Christmas Eve, and a sergeant with a tank coming from Quy Nhon toward Pleiku, so that's going west on Highway 19 East, was towing a disabled tank. And they came to a bridge. Now, there are lots of bridges on this route, and you know how the bridges are marked with military circular things that tell you what tonnage they can handle and so on.

[00:59:42.73] And so the sergeant should have driven his tank across and then winched the disabled tank across, so only one tank is on the bridge at a time, but he doesn't. He drives across, pulling this other tank, and collapses the bridge. Christmas Eve. Christmas Eve. and now this is the main supply route to the Central Highlands, and it was our fault.

[01:00:10.91] So my job is to go down there and take care of this. Well, obviously, I can't build a bridge, so we have to get engineers from Quy Nhon, who could not be more delighted to be called out on Christmas Eve to do this. Not.

[01:00:25.35] So they were very unhappy. I took combat elements down there, staked out the whole area where this is going to be done. They worked all night. Good guys, too, they did a great job. They were not happy to be there, but they did not let that interfere. They put the bridge back in, and then now we get our tanks out of the ditch, and so on. And sometime Christmas day, we get everything back. We're back where we're supposed to be.

[01:00:55.01] Now the battalion commander is in deep kimchi because two other bridges have been knocked down in that corps area within the last couple of weeks by people failing to do what he was supposed-- the sergeant was supposed to do. And it looks like the colonel is going to get relieved.

[01:01:11.92] And there were some extenuating circumstances, you could say. It was late. It was getting dark. They were just out there by themselves. The sergeant might have been getting a little scared. But also, he didn't do what he was supposed to do.

[01:01:32.10] So a hot, hot letter comes down to the battalion commander. You remember the term, reply by endorsement? He's got to reply by endorsement why he shouldn't be relieved, basically, and this comes from the field force commander.

[01:01:44.58] So I'm a pretty good writer, and I had just finished three years on the faculty at West Point in the Department of English. And so I persuaded the colonel that he should let me draft his response, which I did. And if I may be so immodest as to say so, it was a work of art, and he did not get relieved.

[01:02:08.28] I have no idea if that letter had anything to do with it. He may have had a backchannel to somebody who saved his neck, but he never said anything to me. He never thanked me either, but he didn't get relieved. So that was OK. That's the only time that that supply route, the whole time we were responsible for it, went down, and we got it back as best we could.

[01:02:32.24] Here's the other thing I feel I should tell you. I told you how Colonel Clark told me right at the beginning that he thirsted for a Silver Star. And so he's hanging on, hanging on. He wants to fight the tank battalion, a battalion on line, like you do in World War II.

[01:02:54.95] Well, it wasn't that kind of war. It wasn't that. And I've already told you how, where we went someplace, the enemy would basically go away, and so we needed to get somebody engaged with them that could hang on to them while we galloped in there, and then we could do some good. But no, he wants them on line and so on.

[01:03:15.20] Well, we had a wonderful division commander. His name was Ray Peers, P-E-E-R-S, really a wonderful officer. And he came out one day, and he said to Colonel Clark, he said, Clark, the G1 tells me you've been here ten months and you still haven't been on R&R. Take care of that. Well, the colonel hadn't gone on R&R because he was afraid he'd miss something.

[01:03:39.38] OK, so a few days later, he goes to Hong Kong on R&R, five days. He'd been gone two days, let us say. And we had this other responsibility which I mentioned earlier, and that was to be prepared to go to the assistance of any of these small border camps that might run into trouble and need help. And in the middle of the night on, now let's say, the second night after the colonel has left, we get a call.

[01:04:07.50] MARK FRANKLIN: Now, you're acting commander now? He's on R&R and you're the XO--

[01:04:10.47] LEWIS SORLEY: Yeah, I'm the exec, so I'm in command.

[01:04:12.20] MARK FRANKLIN: Right.

[01:04:13.29] LEWIS SORLEY: He's gone for five days. And we get a call in the middle of the night. Our deal was we would have a platoon on, I believe it was 15-minute alert, all the time, and a second platoon out of that same company on 30-minute alert, and then the whole tank company, company headquarters and all, prepared to move within an hour should we need them.

[01:04:36.94] So somebody comes and gets me. It's two o'clock in the morning. I go to the command post, and I talk to these guys. I think the place was Plei Djereng. That was one of the small places out near the border. And they're under heavy attack, and they need help.

[01:04:52.89] So right away, I send the first platoon. 15-minute alert, they were gone in seven or eight minutes. They were pumped. And I wait a few minutes, and then I send the second platoon. And I'm contemplating sending the rest of the company where-- that would give me a captain and a company headquarters to deal with this.

[01:05:13.08] But before that happens, I get a call back. And the first platoon has arrived, and they have laid waste to the enemy, and everything's fine. They don't need any help, but can they stay there till morning? So, to keep these guys secure and happy. And of course I agree to that, and I recall the second platoon. So they come back. I've never left the command post, never gone anywhere.

[01:05:42.55] So not the third day because that would be too fast, but the fourth day, the Stars and Stripes, which is distributed in Hong Kong, lead headline on the front page is something like, Tanks Galloped to Rescue of Border Camp. And Colonel Clark sees that in Hong Kong, and he says, goddamn it, there went my Silver Star.

[01:06:05.85] Well, I, of course, did not get a Silver Star. As I said, I never left the command post. But some of our Soldiers got nice decorations for the great work-- in that first platoon they did and so on. So Colonel Clark comes back, and boy, he is long in the face, and I felt a little sorry for him.

[01:06:23.93] I did think had Colonel Clark been there, he might have jumped on one of those first tanks, and let me stay in the command post, and do what I did, anyway. And maybe he would have gotten a Silver Star. Who knows? But anyway--

[01:06:35.53] MARK FRANKLIN: It's a great story.

[01:06:36.46] LEWIS SORLEY: Yeah. It's hard to say a best day, but another good experience that I remember having, and coming down here today, I was trying to think of this officer's name, and I regret that I can't pull it up now. It just came to me. This officer's name was Buster Boatwright. He was the G3. That means I was working in the operations staff element, and he was in charge of it.

[01:07:06.21] I don't remember what his real name was, but Buster was his nickname, Buster Boatwright. He was a superb professional officer. He later got to be a general and I think at least two stars. And he had this technique that sometimes he would get hold of one of the younger officers working in the G3 shop and take them with him wherever he went for the day. And I don't think he did that often, but he did it once in a while.

[01:07:42.05] And one time, it was my turn, although you didn't necessarily know that. You got to work, and they said, report to Colonel Boatwright. Well, then you thought maybe you'd done something wrong. No, Sorley, you're going with me for the day. So we would go wherever we'd go. And usually, we'd go out to the field, and then we'd go to some other headquarters, and we'd do this and that.

[01:08:02.19] The reason I remember it is not only because he did that but because of what I learned from him as to how he handled the events of the day. He had a military stenographer. I think it was like a staff sergeant, a male staff sergeant. And when he'd come back, he'd get this guy, and I'm still with him. So I'd spend the day with him until he releases me.

[01:08:25.66] And he sits down with this guy, and he's got these notes that he's made, and he would dictate, item one, item two, item three, item four. And so one item would be, this is a reminder to me to do such and such.

[01:08:40.33] I want so and so to do this, suspense date so and so, report to me personally, whatever it would be. And every one of those items from his whole day was written down like that, and then he had somebody that was responsible for following up on each one to see if they were carried out.

[01:08:58.97] Well, I thought that was a terrific technique. But mostly I was impressed by his orderly mind and his desire to mentor younger officers. So I'm glad his name came up, because I've always admired him and been grateful for that day. I felt I had learned a lot about my business on that one day with him.

[01:09:23.51] LEWIS SORLEY: Well, that day when the bridge got knocked down and I had to go down and deal with the engineers on Christmas Eve was not my favorite day, but we got out of it OK. This will sound pollyannaish, I suppose, but we didn't really have any very bad days.

[01:09:41.33] We had a few casualties, but compared to the infantry, not that many. We had a significant number of people wounded, I guess, but most of them recovered. We sent our casualties to two hospitals in Quy Nhon. One was called the 67th Evac, and the other was 85th Evac.

[01:10:06.37] And the battalion commander and I would take turns going down to visit our Soldiers who were convalescing there. This is on the good day side of the ledger. I'm down there one time in the 85th Evac, and I'm seeing two or three Soldiers that we had there.

[01:10:24.97] And in the hallway, I encounter Dr. John Fagan. Dr. John Fagan is then a major, a surgeon, and he and I were high school classmates in this tiny little high school in San Antonio, our graduating class of 36 people. And here the two of us are in this hospital together.

[01:10:43.30] So we fall into one another's arms and so on. We'd always been very good friends and still are, and I was very proud of him. On his spare time, he was running a leprosy clinic for the Vietnamese. That's the kind of guy he was and so on. LEWIS SORLEY: When I was still a staff officer at the I Field Force headquarters in Nha Trang, I had some dealings with the ROK, Republic of Korea, people.

[01:11:11.77] MARK FRANKLIN: What was your impressions?

[01:11:13.44] LEWIS SORLEY: Very professional. The commanding general of the ROK forces then was a Lieutenant General named Chae, spelled C-H-A-E. And one time our headquarters decided to put on a-- what would we call it is a combat symposium, let's say. That's highfalutin term, but basically, it was a mechanism wherein we could coach the Koreans a little in what we wanted them to do and so on.

[01:11:47.93] And I was put in charge of the planning for this. And so then, I was the master of ceremonies when we had it, and I had memorized a few words walking them in probably poor Vietnamese-- I mean, Korean.

[01:12:03.04] But anyway, doing that, I liked the ones that we met and dealt with. Later, I know from research that General Abrams felt that they were always very conservative in that they wanted a lot of resources before they would undertake any operations and that this caused them sometimes to not react as rapidly as he would have liked. But that's a different time and different circumstances. But when I knew them, they were good, I felt.

[01:12:38.16] LEWIS SORLEY: In the tank battalion, we tried to be helpful to the extent we could with the people who resided in that area, and these were Montagnards, the mountain tribespeople. The tribes I remember are Jarai, I think it's J-A-R-A-I, and Bahnar, maybe B-H-N-A-R. And I think there are at least a dozen, and there were probably more, but those are the only two that come to mind.

[01:13:06.64] And we would do things for them. We had a staff officer who was our S5. We got - you have S1 personnel, S2 intelligence, and so on. So S5 in this case was civil affairs. And we had a good young captain in charge of that. He would arrange for us to pay visits to villages, and we would do a couple of things. We would take our medics, and you know the term, MEDCAP?

[01:13:33.20] MARK FRANKLIN: MEDCAP, yup.

[01:13:33.99] LEWIS SORLEY: A Medical-- what does the cap stand for? Medical Capability-- no, that can't be right. Anyway, you would go, you'd take your medics, and people would come to have a look, have you look at what their ailments are. Usually, they were things you could help them a little bit with. And that was appreciated.

[01:14:01.02] And then we would have-- you asked me about food before. Now that I'm thinking of this, I realize that we mostly had cooked food because we had kitchen waste, and we would-- the edible kitchen waste, we would take to these villages to feed to their pigs and help them in that way.

[01:14:22.44] And two things that come to mind, one was we would go for these visits, and we would always, whoever the senior people were, either the colonel or I would usually accompany our team there. And we would be met by the village elders. And in that society, it's clearly, age is the major discriminator of who are the most important people. So we'd meet the oldest person there and so on.

[01:14:54.03] And then in most of these villages, if you had not done this, they would invite you for a rice wine ceremony. And the rice wine would be in big, earthen jars, and you would use reeds as straws, and you've heard about this. And they would give you a brass bracelet, a hammered brass bracelet. I still have mine, and it turned your wrist green if you wore it all the time, but to keep as a souvenir.

[01:15:23.71] And so here's what would typically happen, at least the times I saw it. You'd meet them. You'd get this bracelet. They would invite you to join them for some rice wine. And after they get a little rice wine in them, the other people are cooking lunch, and maybe they're cooking some chicken.

[01:15:42.31] But the village chiefs have had a little rice wine, and they're impatient. They don't want to wait, so they insist the chicken come now. The chicken is now still semi-raw, and we're obliged to try to choke down this chicken. Well, that wasn't my favorite meal, but that was an event that a lot of people experienced.

[01:16:03.72] The other thing that was nice about this, the dwelling places in these villages were very tall, thatched roof buildings. And you climbed up a ladder to get into them, so you're pretty high off the ground. We were taken into one, and some young women there, very attractive young women, probably in their late teens or so, were weaving cloth on big looms.

[01:16:33.75] And this cloth did not look at all primitive. It was very attractive, and it was explained to us that each tribe had a pattern, a traditional pattern, and they would weave this as mostly earth tones and black. And it was very, very attractive, and I was very impressed by that, because here we are in what we would think of as primitive surroundings, but this work is not primitive. It's quite artistic.

[01:17:01.31] The other thing I think of to tell you about this is-- this is again on contact with the local people. These are the Montagnard tribesmen. And on one occasion, the battalion commander and I are invited to dinner by the district chief, just like the county level government, the district chief. He's a military guy. They all are at that time, probably.

[01:17:29.64] And I need to tell you about the second battalion commander a little bit, too, in contrast to the first one, Colonel Clark. So this is Colonel Williams now, who has come. Considerably younger than Colonel Clark, considerably more insightful in terms of the nature of this war and how to fight it. And we no longer are going to line up, battalion on line, and so on.

[01:17:51.27] We have considerable more success in engaging the enemy and therefore in punishing him because of Colonel Williams' better understanding of the war, I felt. And he, by the way, he got to be a three-star later, and deservedly so in my opinion. I loved working with him, and that was very professionally rewarding.

[01:18:12.52] So one night, the district chief invites Colonel Williams and me to dinner. And we're out in the middle of the boondocks here. This may have been a little overkill on our part, but it seemed to us to be prudent to go by tank because it's going to be late at night when we're coming back, and so on, and so on.

[01:18:35.05] So with two or three crewmen and the two of us, we go in this tank, and they wait. The sergeants wait for us and so on. And so we go in, and the wife is there to greet us, but then she disappears. She's not part of the drill, except that she makes sure the food comes out and all this.



[01:18:55.90] So there are six Vietnamese and the two of us. District chief and I no longer recall who the others were, but so he's very nice, the host, and he makes sure everybody gets a drink and what they want. And we're having a drink and talking before the meal comes in.

[01:19:10.39] And after a time, a good host, he sees that the people's drinks have gone down some, so he's going to replenish them. So he goes over to the sideboard, and he picks up, let us say, a bottle of scotch. You're having gin and tonic, but he fills it up with scotch. I'm having some other thing. He fills mine up with scotch. If you were lucky, you were having scotch, and he fills it up with more scotch.

[01:19:30.68] So the colonel and I are not going to let down our side. We choke it down, whatever it is.

[01:19:36.40] MARK FRANKLIN: A true mixed drink.

[01:19:37.03] LEWIS SORLEY: Yes, well said. But somehow, the sergeants got us home OK afterward, although neither one of us could tell you much about the trip home. But even in the middle of the war, there were some things that made you laugh. LEWIS SORLEY: If you go back to World War II-- do you know about V-mail? Have you heard of V-mail?

[01:20:05.87] MARK FRANKLIN: No.

[01:20:06.11] LEWIS SORLEY: It's the letter V, mail. And in World War II, they had forms that were V-mail forms. And you would write your letter on this form, and then unless you were reasonably senior, you'd pass it through a censor, and then it would go to some processing point, and they would microfilm thousands of these V-mails.

[01:20:26.79] And then they'd send the microfilm back to the United States where they'd print them all out and put them in the U.S. mail. And that was a lot faster and more efficient than all these individual letters coming across the ocean and so on.

[01:20:40.76] All right, so I'm going to give you a long answer here because--

[01:20:43.85] MARK FRANKLIN: No, this is great.

[01:20:45.47] LEWIS SORLEY: --this is a great question. I'm about ten years old now, World War II, and my mother is getting V-mails occasionally from my father. And she would read the thing about a couple, three times, and then she would call two or three of her closest friends and read it to them. And when they got V-mails from their husbands, they would likewise share it with their closest friends, because sometimes, there's word in there about where their husband is and so on.

[01:21:14.06] And I'm looking at this with a child's perspective, but the one thing I remember that my mother would invariably say in these conversations with her friends is, well, I know he was OK on such and such a date, but I don't know about now.

[01:21:29.19] OK, well, so there's a major point of difference between then and more recently or even Vietnam. You know to a certainty on a given time and date if your loved one is OK or not. Now you know it in real time, but then, it was ten days later.

[01:21:49.37] So that was World War II. And my father was gone for almost four years, and we didn't-- I don't think we ever talked to him in that time. He went directly from Europe to Asia at the end of V-E Day and didn't come home until well after V-J Day, so that was it.

[01:22:11.90] Vietnam, well, you had the U.S. Postal Service. My recollection is that a round trip-- I write a letter home, and a response to that letter comes back to me-- that's a couple of weeks probably, something like that. Have you heard of the MARS radio network?

[01:22:33.64] MARK FRANKLIN: Yeah, we've had them discussed, but--

[01:22:34.89] LEWIS SORLEY: Yeah, that stands for something like Military Affiliate Radio System or something like that. And if there was a MARS station anywhere around you, you could sign up to get a call through that system to somebody back in the States. And I've forgotten now, but you were allocated three minutes or five minutes. But anyway, it was a relatively short time.

[01:23:03.02] And so you have to go to the MARS station. Well, I only got to do that once, and I think it was probably in Nha Trang, but I don't remember that for sure. Very unsatisfactory, in my opinion. Here you are in a MARS station waiting your turn. There is a guy here. He's talking within earshot of all the people who are waiting.

[01:23:26.43] So the first thing is it's not duplex. You can only talk one way. So when your wife talks, when she finishes, she has to say, over, so this person operating the system can switch it the other way, so now you can talk. Well, it takes about three of your five minutes to get her to do that right.

[01:23:45.44] And then you want to say some intimate things about how much you miss her and what's going to happen when you come home and all. Well, there are five other guys sitting here. That's quite inhibiting. So the whole thing, I thought, was less than satisfactory.

[01:24:03.06] Some people I know, but I never did this, would make tape recordings, little cassette tape recordings, and send those back and forth. And sometimes, their wives would keep those. Sometimes, if they did not have their wits about them, they would record over them, and it's all lost. But I know a couple of people who have a good collection of tapes that tell a lot about what they were experiencing.

[01:24:25.14] I never said anything to my family at home, and I've already stated that my marriage was not on very firm ground, anyway. I never said anything about operational things or-- mostly platitudes and so on, so that communication wasn't very important or certainly not very meaningful. But that's not true for everybody.

[01:24:51.90] Today, as we all know, people who are deployed and their families back home work in virtually constant communication. They email. They do Facebook. Who knows what all they do? And I've asked lots of people that I've met who are contemporarily serving or recently have. What do you think? I contrast that with what I've experienced. I said, what do you think? Is it better now or not?

[01:25:21.04] They all say the same thing. There's some pluses and some minuses. And that's easy to understand. You don't necessarily need to know that Johnny has an earache. There's not a damn thing you can do about it and so on. But it is good for your wife to know that you're OK right now, not two weeks later, or before I mean, or when you sent the V-mail, or whatever. You know the cartoonist, Gary-- no, the Doonesbury cartoons?

[01:25:50.65] MARK FRANKLIN: Yeah, Trudeau.

[01:25:51.51] LEWIS SORLEY: Garry Trudeau.

[01:25:52.54] MARK FRANKLIN: Yeah.

[01:25:53.49] LEWIS SORLEY: He gets it perfectly. He had a Sunday strip where it's a bigger one time, and the sergeant's going to go out on patrol, night patrol. And he tells his wife he'll be back six o'clock in the morning, and he'll email her then.

[01:26:07.05] And so they go out, and they get into a big firefight, and he doesn't get back till eight o'clock in the morning. And see, then he emails his wife, and she's all bent out of shape that he didn't get hold of her at six o'clock like he said. And he tries to explain about the firefight and so on. She said, well, would it have killed you to let me know? And he says, yes, that was our thinking, yes. Well, Trudeau just nails it, absolutely nails it.

[01:26:29.30] So it was sort of primitive when we were there, and I must say in retrospect, I'm not that unhappy with it having been that way. The one exception to what I just told you is many people who didn't go to Hawaii to meet their families but went on R&R elsewhere, they could get commercial phone and call and talk an hour or whatever if they want to. And a lot of people did that, of course. That was the exception.

[01:26:55.42] MARK FRANKLIN: Now, in reverse, did you get much news about what was going on back home, some of the social movements, some of the--

[01:27:01.72] LEWIS SORLEY: Yeah, yeah.

[01:27:02.31] MARK FRANKLIN: Do you think that news affected you in any way?

[01:27:04.63] LEWIS SORLEY: I felt adequately informed about what was going on back there. Yeah, it made me mad, but I didn't spend any time worrying about it. A, there's nothing I can do about it, and B, we're pretty busy where we are. So I really don't think at that point in the war anyway that made much difference to the people who were fighting the war. Maybe later.

[01:27:32.01] LEWIS SORLEY: By the time I'm going home, which is June of 1967, we're going to go from Pleiku. I think it's called New Pleiku Airfield, which can take big jets. And I remember this vividly because I was sitting on the right side of the aircraft by the window, and we're taxiing.

[01:27:58.26] And there's a lone GI standing along the side. And as we go by, pulls himself up to attention, gives us a perfect salute, waves us home. Well, I've thought of that guy many times since then, hoping when his time came, he got home safely, too. That was quite something for me.

[01:28:23.43] I don't know where we stopped on the way home, but I'm sure we did a refueling, one or more refuelings. But we wound up in San Francisco, but this time not at Travis but at the San Francisco commercial terminal.

[01:28:39.84] I've heard people say who came home later that they had to fight their way through protesters outside the gate and stuff like that, and they were told, don't wear your uniform, and so on. There was none of that at this time.

[01:28:52.92] So I stayed in San Francisco for a few days. My wife came there. My family had stayed in Newburgh, New York, just up the river from West Point. We went back there at some point. We went, picked up that car that I had bought in Hong Kong. I think we picked that up in Brooklyn, somewhere in Brooklyn, maybe Flatbush Avenue, a dealer.

[01:29:22.10] And then I get this wonderful follow-on assignment. The Army, in its wisdom, decides to send me not to Fort Leavenworth but to the Naval Command and Staff School, which is part of the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island.

[01:29:39.25] MARK FRANKLIN: Wow, really?

[01:29:39.72] LEWIS SORLEY: One of the most beautiful places I've ever been.

[01:29:42.26] MARK FRANKLIN: True.

[01:29:42.90] LEWIS SORLEY: And if you're going there and you're not Navy or Marine Corps, you show up a few days early, and you get a little orientation, one day of which was to go out. I go down to, I think, Groton, and get on a diesel sub, and go out, and dive in this sub. And I've got a picture of myself at the conning tower.

[01:30:05.41] Well, this is a hell of a lot of fun after-- literally, ten days before, I'm in a jungle in Vietnam, and now I'm in Newport, Rhode Island. It's the summer of-- there's America's Cup races going on. All the Aussies are in town. The whole place is like-- it's a circus, and wonderful time there.

[01:30:25.85] MARK FRANKLIN: Was that transition difficult, coming from a combat environment going to a more relaxed, academic environment?

[01:30:31.90] LEWIS SORLEY: Not one tiny little bit, not one tiny little bit. And I had a piece of really good fortune early on. The Navy was really proud of their officer's club there, and they should have been. It was a really good club. And by accident, early in my stay there, I found out that the club manager of whom they were all so proud was a retired Army mess sergeant.

[01:30:53.46] MARK FRANKLIN: Wow.

[01:30:53.87] LEWIS SORLEY: And I got a ton of mileage out of that and made a lot of good friends there. There were 14 Army officers there out of about 200 and some-odd total, and some representatives from other services, and so on.

[01:31:10.33] The president of the Naval War College was a wonderful admiral, three-star admiral named Chick Hayward. And we got to be friends because he was that kind of guy. I'm an obscure major, and he's a three-star admiral, and we became friends.

[01:31:24.79] I probably shouldn't tell you this either, but the senior Army rep was a colonel named Long, big tall guy and a nice guy. And he came around to the seminar room one day. Well, earlier, we had a faculty adviser, each one of us, and he comes around four or five desks here. That's where you hang out between classes and you keep your books and stuff.

[01:31:49.01] And I'm reading, and this officer comes in, says, what are you reading? And I showed him, and I was reading, Command at Sea. And he said, what? An Army guy is reading that? Well, so that led to a conversation that led to a nice friendship with him, and I really enjoyed the people there very much.

[01:32:05.80] Colonel Long comes in soon before graduation, and he says-- the good news, bad news joke formulation had just come into play. So he said, Bob, I have some good news and some bad news. I said, what's that, Colonel Long? Well, he said, the good news is you're going to graduate first in the class. The bad news is the prize can only go to a Naval officer or a Marine. So I said, well, that's OK. That's OK, Colonel Long. I've had a wonderful year here, and I can live with that.

[01:32:37.06] So the Navy calls them detailers, the people who-- the detailers come, and they tell us where we're going. And I'm going now to the Pentagon to the Office of the Chief of Staff, and the chief of staff is General Westmoreland.

[01:32:52.93] And so I stay there two and a half years, and then I go to Germany and command that tank battalion I mentioned earlier during now the tail end of the Vietnam War. And so I now see those things that you asked me about before, which were not apparent in Vietnam when I was there but now throughout the Army.

[01:33:13.28] MARK FRANKLIN: Difficult time time in the Army.

[01:33:13.78] LEWIS SORLEY: Yeah, yeah, but anyway, my trip back from Vietnam was a delight, and it felt that that year at Newport was as nice as it gets.

[01:33:22.76] MARK FRANKLIN: Have you stayed in touch with your fellow veterans, folks that you met along the way, since you retired from the military?

[01:33:29.11] LEWIS SORLEY: Yeah, almost inevitably, I've stayed in touch with my West Point classmates, most of whom served in Vietnam, some more. I only had the one tour there. Some of them had two tours. It's possible there are even a couple who were aviators that might have had even three tours there.

[01:33:45.74] And we're in close touch. I have compiled two long histories on CDs of my class as cadets and then as officers. Took me three years to do those. And now I'm engaged in writing memorial articles for all the ones who were deceased and haven't got one yet. So yeah, I probably know more about my classmates than anybody else, and they all agree with that, so that's good.

[01:34:13.19] But I have a lot of other friends. If you go back and teach at West Point, it's like this pattern that evolves. By the time you come out, serve a few years, go to graduate school, and then go back and teach,

[01:34:27.28] the guys you're teaching are probably about a decade behind you. And then they go back and teach these ones and so on. So there were people in the classes of '66 in particular, ten years after me, but '65 also, and a little bit '64, that I first knew in the section room and that I still know today.

[01:34:48.66] I'm very proud to tell you that I am still in touch with three Soldiers who were in that first tank platoon that I commanded as a second lieutenant. One of them was my gunner, one of them was my driver, and one of them, he's now just deceased, was my platoon sergeant's gunner.

[01:35:04.53] And they were wonderful people. And they were-- my gunner became a master sergeant, served 22 years, and then went on the faculty of a military school in the Richmond public school system and served 23 more years. So he was in uniform 45 years.

[01:35:22.40] MARK FRANKLIN: Wow.

[01:35:23.46] LEWIS SORLEY: And my driver became a lieutenant colonel, served 20-some odd years, and my platoon sergeant's gunner became a major. And we have gathered together, and broken bread together, and told war stories, some even possibly true. And it means a lot to me that I'm still in touch with those guys.

[01:35:44.78] MARK FRANKLIN: That's amazing.

[01:35:45.08] LEWIS SORLEY: Yeah.

[01:35:51.38] MARK FRANKLIN: Do you think your experience in Vietnam changed your life in some way or affected you in some way? And if it did, how?

[01:35:58.83] LEWIS SORLEY: Yeah, that's a good question. I'm not sure how to answer that. Your initial reaction is, sure, sure, it did. Every professional Soldier that I know, at least if they're combat arms Soldiers, always has some questions about how they'd perform in combat. I'm very sensitive, as I've told you at least twice already, that the combat I experienced was a lot easier by far than my infantry colleagues, classmates, and so on.

[01:36:30.98] This will sound like boilerplate, but I think I probably appreciate the good things in life more than I did before. I don't remember making any resolves in Vietnam except one. I said, if I get through this, I'm never going to run out of ice again. And I never have.

[01:36:54.81] And I think I have enormous compassion for the Vietnamese. I have a lot of Vietnamese friends. The books that I have written, a lot of them say mean a lot to them, because I think they tell the true story of their great efforts and so on. And I'm very proud of them.

[01:37:15.33] My closest Vietnamese friend, I first met when we were captains in the advanced course at Fort Knox together, 1961 to '62. He became a full colonel, was a G3 for General Truong, considered by General Abrams and many other Americans as their finest field general. And he and his wife came to America. His family got out three days ahead of the end thanks to another officer who was in that advanced course with us, Colonel Wolf, got them out.

[01:37:47.27] And my friend, his name is Ha Mai Viet. Viet got out the last day before the fall of Saigon. They found each other in a refugee camp in maybe Okinawa or someplace like that, came to America, and they've done really well. They have five children, Viet. They wound up in Sugar Land. It's a Houston suburb. It's one of the places where there's one of the largest populations of expatriate Vietnamese.

[01:38:19.89] Viet and his wife worked two jobs and sometimes three jobs to put all five kids through Texas A&M, several of them, and Sam Houston State in Houston. Three jobs means a day job, a night job, and a weekend job. Now, they didn't do that all the time, but they did it when they had to and very proud of them and what they've got.

[01:38:43.31] All of these kids now have white collar jobs, and one of them works for the U.S. Patent Office. One of them works for an airline, so her father can come up here and see me occasionally thanks to that, and so on. The mother is quite strong, and they understood that if their kids didn't get educated and good employment, they were going to have a hard time here and that they wouldn't always be around to look out for them.

[01:39:16.58] So she gets them together when they're all still, let's say, high schoolers and below. And she says, now, I want to talk to you about going to college. She said, nobody has to go to college. She said, I'll give you \$1,500 to get started if you don't want to go to college, but you're not welcome here anymore. How many want to go to college? Five hands go up. They all want to go to college, and they all do.

[01:39:43.42] MARK FRANKLIN: That's good for them.

[01:39:44.33] LEWIS SORLEY: So then a little later, they've gotten these jobs and so on. I don't know what they all do, but I think there are three girls and two boys. I think the girls call up their mom. One of them does and said, Mom, we want to take you out for lunch on Mother's Day but so-and-so can't do it on Sunday. Can we pick you up on Saturday? She agrees to that. They pick her up. They don't take her to lunch. They take her to the Toyota dealer, and they say, Mom, which one do you want? It's already paid for.

[01:40:13.70] MARK FRANKLIN: Oh wow.

[01:40:14.91] LEWIS SORLEY: So you got to be really proud of people like that. And I am.

[01:40:21.76] MARK FRANKLIN: How did your experience affect the way you feel about veterans returning from the battlefields today?

[01:40:29.53] LEWIS SORLEY: That's another really good question, Mark. I appreciate how thoughtful you're being in this interview. I have not met a single veteran of my era who resents in any way the better welcome home and the support that today's veterans are getting, far from it. They're really happy about it. And of course, they wish it had been different when we came home.

[01:40:56.18] But I'll tell you the truth. This probably differs greatly between professional Soldiers and those who served only for a period of time when they were asked to do so or when they volunteered to do so. But for professional Soldiers, I don't really much care of what the average guy on the street thinks. I care what my colleagues or what my peers think, I care what my fellow Soldiers think, and I care what I think about myself.

[01:41:22.88] And I feel that I did the best I could and that it wasn't too bad, and I think that about most of my peers, as well. And that's where we look for support and reinforcement, I think. And I'm not unhappy with that.

[01:41:42.67] MARK FRANKLIN: What do you think the war meant to your generation?

[01:41:47.19] LEWIS SORLEY: Well.

[01:41:48.51] MARK FRANKLIN: And you've written about it.

[01:41:49.75] LEWIS SORLEY: Oh sure. I very much regret the sacrifice of lives, and others who were badly injured, and so on, in a cause that could have turned out better. It didn't have to end that way. So I very much regret that. And that's true for the Vietnamese, as well. It's even true for the North Vietnamese. Had that war been fought in a different way, the way that Abrams wanted to fight it,

[01:42:26.38] I don't see how you can conclude anything other than, General Westmoreland, by his foolish approach to the conduct of the war, squandered four years of support from the American people, and the Congress, and even much of the media. And had that not been done,



had we gotten started on the Abrams approach four years earlier, certainly a different outcome and arguably a far more favorable outcome.

[01:42:58.90] And there are a lot of flex points in the story of this war where it could have gone a different way. One of the most-- what would you say? I don't know how to call it, but when they decided to replace General Harkins in early 1964, there were four candidates proposed to the president.

[01:43:32.72] President's now LBJ because Jack Kennedy has just been killed, and Westmoreland is the candidate that he chose. The other three candidates were Harold K. Johnson, who instead became chief of staff of the Army, Creighton Abrams, who became vice chief of Staff of the Army, and Bruce Palmer, Jr., who became the DCSOPS, the deputy chief of staff for operations in the Army.

[01:43:55.77] And I don't think LBJ knew any of those officers. I think McNamara, secretary of defense, had a lot to do with who would be chosen. Maxwell Taylor I'm sure had a lot to do with this. He had been a mentor of Westmoreland since World War II. What we now know-- I'm speaking as a historian now--

[01:44:17.86] MARK FRANKLIN: Mm-hmm.

[01:44:18.13] LEWIS SORLEY: --beyond any question that those other three candidates saw the war one way, the way Abrams fought it when he finally got a chance, and only Westmoreland saw it the way he did. You could say we had three chances to win and one to lose, and then we got the one to lose. That's heartbreaking, but I also think it's accurate.

[01:44:36.78] MARK FRANKLIN: How do you think the war is remembered today?

[01:44:40.76] LEWIS SORLEY: By?

[01:44:41.97] MARK FRANKLIN: By the American public, or is it?

[01:44:46.80] LEWIS SORLEY: Several years ago on one of the network radio stations here, it was reported that x percent, and it was a high percent, let's say 60 percent of the American people, no longer remembered whether it was North or South Vietnam we were supporting in that war.

[01:45:03.46] So a lot of people ask me to come and talk about the war. I don't particularly like to talk to high schoolers and like that because you've got to explain everything from the ground up. I like to talk to people that at least have some general knowledge of the war.

[01:45:20.57] And I think that's why veterans don't talk much about their wartime experiences, even with families, because you've got to explain everything from the-- by the time you get through doing that, you're exhausted, and they don't understand anyway and so on.

[01:45:32.62] I think the war is remembered by professional Soldiers with regret, but also some pride. I gave a talk at the Army Navy Club a couple of years ago. They had a three-year set of commemorative lectures about the Vietnam era, and I gave three talks, I think. I talked once about the Westmoreland era, once about the Abrams era, and then once to wrap up everything at the end.

[01:46:02.99] And I think I called that talk Pride and Sorrow. And those are the two elements of how I think about the war. I have a lot of pride in the things that most people did, including the South Vietnamese, and a lot of sorrow about how it turned out. And my concluding words were-- and I said, this is my last word on the war to them in this three-year thing-- "it didn't have to end that way." So that's about the best I can do on that.

[01:46:36.34] MARK FRANKLIN: What lessons would you like to pass on to future generations?

[01:46:39.92] LEWIS SORLEY: Mmm. This is above my pay grade, but if you're going to go to war, you, the people running the enterprise, and that's from the commander-in-chief on down, should do everything possible to get a unified agreement or backing from the body politic that this is a good thing to do.

[01:47:07.73] And then you should do everything possible to explain how you're going about it and why that's the way it should be done. And then you ought to do everything you can to-- reward is not quite the right word-- express your appreciation to those who did their duty when they were called upon to do that, whether they volunteered or were-- we don't have any more conscription right now.

[01:47:36.57] Those things were-- LBJ never made any effort to do those things. Nixon tried a little bit, but he got discouraged early on, wrongly, I think. I don't think Mr. Nixon ever understood how well things were going under Bunker, Abrams, and Colby, who were a wonderful triumvirate of public servants in my judgment.

[01:48:02.23] Some people would maybe want to answer that question by saying, don't get into a fight you can't win. But usually, in my opinion anyway, you can't know until you try. And then once you do get into it, well, all senior officers that I've ever heard say, it's good to have a plan, but the plan becomes obsolete at the first contact with the enemy.

[01:48:26.73] MARK FRANKLIN: Never survives first contact with the enemy.

[01:48:28.15] LEWIS SORLEY: Yeah, yeah, yeah, and I believe that's probably right. LEWIS SORLEY: For a long time, I didn't like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. That's the Wall, so called. I thought it was a black ditch that only portrayed those who lost their lives and only portrayed them as victims, and so I didn't go. Ever.

[01:48:59.30] And then my West Point class started having a gathering there near Veterans Day, usually on the Sunday near Veterans Day, and they would put a wreath in front of the name of

one of our classmates that we lost in Vietnam. We lost ten classmates plus one former classmate, much loved also. And I still didn't go.

[01:49:28.12] And then they got to the time when they were going to put the wreath in front of the name of my cadet roommate, and I couldn't stay away. So now I go all the time. And I still don't like the fact that they only portray those who were killed and show them as victims, but we don't see it that way. So we've preempted it, if you will, co-opted it, whatever you want to say.

[01:50:02.53] MARK FRANKLIN: You've made it your own.

[01:50:03.27] LEWIS SORLEY: And I'm OK with that now. LEWIS SORLEY: First of all, I'm very happy it's being done. Second, I want to say that I am very favorably impressed with everyone I have met who is involved in it, and that's more than a couple.

[01:50:25.51] I don't want to say it's a stealth operation, but it's low-key. I'm not sure that the broader public is very much aware of it. All the veterans I know who are aware of it appreciate it. So maybe that's good enough.

[01:50:42.92] MARK FRANKLIN: I see that you're wearing the Vietnam veterans lapel pin.

[01:50:45.10] LEWIS SORLEY: Yup.

[01:50:45.35] MARK FRANKLIN: I just want to know, how did you receive it, and what's your impression of that lapel pin?

[01:50:49.61] LEWIS SORLEY: Well, I had the pleasure of coming on an earlier occasion, and a very attractive lady gave it to me.

[01:50:57.04] MARK FRANKLIN: Well, that's good to hear.

[01:50:57.68] LEWIS SORLEY: And I'm very happy. And actually, I think it's quite attractive, and I'm happy to have it, thank you. I had come to Washington, as I told you I think, after the War College. Well, I was in the tank battalion.

[01:51:10.26] I went to the War College, stayed on the faculty of the War College two years-- this is at Carlisle Barracks, the Army War College-- and then came to the secretary of defense's office, where I worked for Jim Schlesinger, and specifically for Andy Marshall in OSD Net Assessment. I was his so-called senior military assistant, and that was very interesting work.

[01:51:30.14] I was recruited from there to go to CIA. And it was just at the point I was reaching the 20-year point of eligibility for retirement, and so I did that. I stayed seven years at CIA. I had three different assignments, all very, very interesting to me. And they liked my work, and they moved me up a lot, which was also gratifying.

[01:51:55.57] But when I had that tank battalion in Vietnam-- I mean in Germany, as I've already alluded to, the situation in the Army worldwide was pretty grim. A lot of units had been drawn

down to feed the needs of Vietnam. Those elements of indiscipline that we discussed a little bit earlier had gone through the Army worldwide.

[01:52:25.71] We were under strength. We were short of just about all the combat-- the training wherewithal you'd need, ammunition, gasoline, spare parts, but especially low-level leadership, young sergeants and young officers. And the Soldiers we had were basically just passing through.

[01:52:44.20] Here's why. In order to keep up our strength so that we could say to NATO, we're keeping up our required strength, we're taking young Soldiers who had entered the Army, gone through training, gone to Vietnam for a year, taken two weeks' leave, and now they had maybe three and a half months left for their two-year service.

[01:53:03.37] They wanted to go home. And that's all they wanted to do is to go home. And I didn't blame them. But instead, they're sent to Germany and get in these units. We're turning over about a third of the unit every quarter and so on.

[01:53:16.92] So in an effort to motivate the young Soldiers, I want to learn all I can about the glorious history of this unit in World War II, because the battalion I have was a direct descendant of B Company in Colonel Abrams' World War II 37th Tank Battalion.

[01:53:33.99] A great outfit, led Patton's Third Army across Europe was, the first unit into Bastogne to relieve the 101st Airborne Division when it's surrounded by the Germans during the Battle of the Bulge. Abrams got two DSCs, two Silver Stars, battlefield promotion to colonel, and so on. Great outfit.

[01:53:50.79] I go to Bastogne and so on. I write a little history of the battalion, mimeograph it, pass it out, give little talks, here is the path and so on. And I want to say that I-- I regret to say that I don't think I influenced anybody in the battalion all that much because as I said, they're-- essentially, it's a moving train.

[01:54:09.91] MARK FRANKLIN: Sure.

[01:54:10.50] LEWIS SORLEY: Influenced myself quite a bit. And so I look around, and when I come home and so on, nobody's told the Abrams story, and I think, maybe I could do that. So after seven years with CIA, the last two of which I basically worked seven days a week on a highly classified program under civilian cover where my predecessor had been fired, and so they were behind schedule and over budget, and in two years, we got them a little bit ahead of schedule and on budget.

[01:54:48.40] And I said to my boss, maybe this would be a good time for me to take early retirement, and he agreed to that. And the reason I did that was to write an Abrams biography. So I did. So I did that. I wrote a biography of General Abrams, very well-received. Simon & Schuster published it. I wrote a biography then of General Harold K. Johnson, who had been the Army chief of staff the same four years that Westmoreland was commanding in Vietnam.

[01:55:16.13] By great good luck which would take too long to describe, I got access to highly classified tape recordings that had been made in Abrams' headquarters for the whole four years that he's there, the weekly staff meetings, when the secretary of defense comes out, when the chairman comes out, so on.

[01:55:33.29] No one else has listened to those. Took me a year to listen to them. And when I got those cleared, I used those as one of the primary bases for a book called, A Better War. The subtitle I can never quite remember is something like, "the unexamined victories and final tragedy of America's last years in Vietnam."

[01:55:53.48] It's a very sad book in many ways because of what might have been. That was very well-received, nominated for the Pulitzer, and so on. And then I had to do the book I really didn't want to do, but it was the rest of the story, about General Westmoreland, and which explained so many things.

[01:56:18.71] I have nine books altogether. Among the others that I'm very proud of are two that helped to make up for the underrepresentation of the South Vietnamese viewpoint in the vast history of the war. The Vietnam literature is-- no one person could read it all if they read all day, every day. But it's deficient in the views of the South Vietnamese.

[01:56:44.28] So I edited a book based on monographs that some of the senior Vietnamese wrote under the Army Center of Military History right after the war. And then I did the 900-page book of the tape recordings made in Abrams' headquarters.

[01:57:05.00] And so I mentioned to you earlier my best Vietnamese friend, Ha Mai Viet, and how hard he and his wife worked to get those kids through college and so on. He said, well, we're tired now, but they will take care of us. Well, I could say I'm a little tired now. I'm not probably going to write any more books, but I'm glad I did the ones I did. I thank you so much for this opportunity.

[01:57:32.47] MARK FRANKLIN: Sir, thank you. This has been great.

[01:57:33.90] LEWIS SORLEY: You're a terrific interviewer, and it's been a real pleasure talking to you.

[01:57:36.42] MARK FRANKLIN: I appreciate that.

[01:57:37.27] LEWIS SORLEY: Thank you.

[01:57:37.75] MARK FRANKLIN: And thanks for your service, and thanks for agreeing to do this interview. It was one of the best we've had so far. It was amazing.

[01:57:42.19] LEWIS SORLEY: That's nice of you.

[01:57:42.82] MARK FRANKLIN: Thank you.

[01:57:43.39] LEWIS SORLEY: Thanks a lot.

[01:57:44.14] MARK FRANKLIN: You bet.