

INTERVIEWEE: GENERAL L. W. WALT, Assistant Commandant, USMC

INTERVIEWER: PAIGE E. MULHOLLAN

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M: Let's begin, General Walt, by identifying you. You're General Lewis W. Walt, now Deputy Commandant of the United States Marine Corps.

W: Assistant Commandant.

M: And how long have you been in that position, sir?

W: I've been here since the first of January 1968.

M: For the last year of the Johnson Administration, then. At the beginning of the Johnson Administration, you were commanding in the I Corps in Viet Nam, is that correct?

W: No. I went out to command in I Corps in May of 1965.

M: And then came back in a little over two years--

W: I came back in June of '67.

M: Did you ever have the opportunity during any of that time to associate with President Johnson on a more-or-less personal basis?

W: I had occasion to see him and talk to him once in Viet Nam when he came to Cam Ranh Bay. I talked to him for a few minutes. Then midway in my tour--I think it was February '66--I came back here for about twenty days, and during that time I had about an hour or an hour-and-a-half with the President.

M: He did visit your command while you were in Viet Nam?

W: No, part of my command was there. But it was a consolidated group that he talked to there at Cam Ranh Bay. I flew some of my NCOs down there so that we'd have representation.

M: What kind of an effect does a Presidential visit like that have on troops in the field? Is it appreciable?

W: It had a very good effect at that time in particular, because that was about when the really strong dissent was beginning here in this country and was getting in the papers. The troops were reading this. They were hearing about it back home; and they were just wondering how much support they had back here. And I think to have the President come out there and assure them that he was back of them, and that the majority of the American people was in back of them, meant a great deal to them.

M: The dissent at home was fairly commonly known among the troops at the front?

W: They were getting clippings from home and letters from home, yes.

M: It did affect them, in your opinion, pretty strongly?

W: Yes.

M: Is it just my imagination as a layman--it has been a long time since I was in the Army--that the Marine Corps has gotten perhaps less public exposure for its participation in Viet Nam than it has in past involvements the United States has had such as Korea, for example, World War II, the Pacific? Is there some reason for this?

W: No, I don't think we've had less exposure. In the other wars, of course, we got our heavy exposure in the initial phases of an amphibious assault, where we were it as far as the operation was concerned. But then it would always fall off after that. But we've had pretty constant exposure during Viet Nam, I'd say, all the way through--both good and bad.

M: Is it the kind of war that the Marine Corps is particularly suited to handle, as opposed to the other branches, because of its training and so on?

W: I think we're as well suited to handle this type of war in Viet Nam as we could be. Of particular note is our basic organization, infantry organization. One marine rifle squad, with its three fire teams, has proved to be extremely effective in the anti-guerrilla warfare and in the long-range patrolling in back of the enemy positions and so forth. Also, the fact that our marine battalions are heavier (larger) than the army battalions has also been a big help to us, because we've had that many more personnel when we needed them.

M: I know at the time you left Viet Nam and came back here, there was discussion in the press about an alleged disagreement between you and, particularly, Army commanders regarding the necessity of concentrating on destroying the Viet Cong infrastructure in the countryside as opposed to concentrating on mainline North Vietnamese forces. I also notice that General Cushman still is participating in the point of view that you expressed. Was this a serious tactical disagreement?

W: Some of the Army commanders, I guess, probably didn't see the value of working with and winning over the people like we did in I Corps. I think this was probably due to some extent to the tactical situation.

The way I got into the pacification business was as a matter of necessity back in 1965. My primary mission, at that time when I first went out there, was to defend a big air base at Danang. At that time we had no offensive permission. We weren't allowed to go out and look for the enemy. All we could do was sit back and watch that air field. I couldn't even put my troops in the populated areas around the air field at that time.

Well, knowing this, and knowing that the guerrilla had the capability

of using 81-millimeter mortars, I decided that I'd better make doggone sure that everybody within 81-millimeter mortar range of that air field were our friends. We did this by getting acquainted with the people and working with the people and getting the confidence of the people. We found this started to pay off. Because when we got the confidence of the people, then they started giving us information. More and more information in intelligence that we could use in our anti-guerrilla warfare. So we just kept with this program.

Also, after awhile, I found that this was really what was winning-- and I mean in a measurable sense--winning the war in Viet Nam; because every time we'd take over a hamlet or a village and secured it, and helped those people to reconstitute their local government and reconstruct their communities that had been torn down, then they became strong enough to take care of themselves. After all this was what we are trying to do country-wide in South Viet Nam--is to build the country up to where it can take care of itself.

I believe very strongly in the pacification effort. I don't think you could ignore the main force war. I think there are two enemies in Viet Nam. I think the guerrilla--the one down among the people, the one that has got the stranglehold on the people--he is the one that had to be destroyed and eliminated. He and his infrastructure--his political infrastructure--had to be eliminated.

At the same time the North Vietnamese Army came into this war out there with two missions assigned them. I know this from papers we captured from the first battalion we ran into of the North Vietnamese Army. In this paper it said they had two missions. One was to go down and fight

the U. S. forces and South Vietnamese Army forces to keep them off the back of the guerrilla, to pull us away from the populated area.

Their second mission was just as clearly stated--to cause as many casualties as possible on the United States forces so as to quote "make headlines in the United States" unquote. This ties into their psychological propaganda program.

About the end of the first year I was out there, I got a defector from the other side--a lieutenant-colonel. He had been in the North Vietnamese Army for about twelve years. He decided that they weren't winning the war and he was getting tired of living out in the jungles, so he came on our side. He was a very smart man, brilliant man. He told me at that time that he had decided that they couldn't possibly win the war, on the ground, on the battlefield, in Viet Nam against the U. S. forces and their allies.

M: He had decided that or they--

W: He had decided that. But he said that his superiors didn't go along with him on this. They believed--and he believed that they got it from Hanoi--they believed that if they could carry out this protracted war and keep the war going on long enough, that they could win the war--not on the battlefield in South Viet Nam, but in the political and psychological arena in the United States. You can see that's exactly what they've been fighting for.

M: They've kept on since then in that same role.

W: Yes. So you've got two battles out there. One, you've got to keep the North Vietnamese armed forces from coming in and disrupting your pacification effort. Your pacification effort includes the fighting of

the guerrilla and getting rid of his infrastructure. And you can't ignore either one of them. But I think if you just pay attention to the NVA and main units and ignore the population area and the guerrillas, then you're not making headway. Because the day that you get all the guerrillas out of the populated areas and the day you get all these local governments reconstituted and their communities reconstructed and their schools open and their people back on their feet, that's the day that South Viet Nam is going to be a free country. And that's the day when we're going to be able to start pulling out, and they'll take care of themselves.

M: Did you think that usually you got reliable intelligence on the degree of regular force, main force penetrations through the DMZ while you were there?

W: I got better intelligence on the penetration through the DMZ area probably than anywhere else, because it wasn't so complicated up there. We didn't have the populated areas up there to worry about. I had a lot of patrols of my own out, and through other intelligence means. The first time they came across with the division--this was in the summer of 1966--we knew that division was coming across. We knew how many battalions had crossed the DMZ. It was at that time that the Hasting's battle started--the Hastings campaign--in which we landed our battalions back of four of their battalions and cut them off, and really chopped the division up in short order there. So our intelligence in that area was good. The intelligence of forces coming through Laos was much more difficult because it was a much more confused situation.

M: Why do you think the intelligence that gets into print here, at least, as coming from military sources, seemed always to be so overly optimistic

about the success and progress that was being made?

W: Because the people who were overly optimistic never appreciated what the real honest-to-God guts of that war was all about--and I'm still talking about the guerrilla. We never appreciated the fact that he was going to be so tough to get rid of. It has never been a problem for us to defeat the North Vietnamese Army. Since the summer of 1965 they haven't had a victory of a battalion size battle or bigger. They've had little victories, but nothing of battalion size. We've always been able to defeat them. This is why today they've suffered such losses--the North Vietnamese Army alone has suffered over five hundred thousand dead that we know of on the battlefields, by admission of General Giap himself.

M: The main force--

W: I'm talking about the North Vietnamese--and another hundred thousand others in South Viet Nam. The total of the enemy loss is over six hundred thousand. This is just because we have such a tremendous advantage over them. When we fight conventional war against conventional units, they haven't got a chance in the world to stand up against our forces. And, of course it makes you optimistic if you're just looking at that part of the war.

But when you take a look at this other part, this guerrilla pacification effort, and you realize that first you have to go into a hamlet, and you've got to clean the guerrilla off the top of the ground and then through months of effort, you've got to clean him out from under the ground. Then you help these people who are most of them destitute. Most of them, their families are broken up, some of them in the VC, a lot of them killed. And you help them to reconstitute a government in that

village or hamlet, and then help that government to reconstruct their community. This takes time. There is no short cut.

And another thing that takes time is the replacing of the leadership in South Viet Nam that has been systematically destroyed by the enemy forces. The Communists have systematically destroyed the civilian leadership as well as the military leadership. The civilian leadership was thin to start with because during the French occupation--eighty-three years before World War II--the people out in the hamlets and villages didn't have a chance to go to school. They didn't have a chance to better their way of life in any way. The ten percent of the people that lived in places like Saigon and Quang Tri and Danang and in the cities--those ten percent of the whole population were given a chance to go to school and better themselves, but it wasn't a very big base from which to operate.

Thirty thousand leaders killed, the leadership was very scarce, either in military or in civilian life. Now, we've got to reconstitute that leadership. And this is something else that's going to take time in South Viet Nam. We're doing it. As an example, in 1954 when the French were still--their system was still in effect out there, there were only about two hundred thousand kids in school. Today we've helped them to build over eighteen thousand schools, and we've got pretty near three million kids in school.

M: Even during the war?

W: While the war's going on, we've been doing this. This is all a part of the pacification effort. You see, we're rebuilding this nation at the same

time we're fighting a war. But you don't read about this in the papers. This doesn't make headlines. The thing that makes headlines is this war against the NVA, the conventional war, the air strikes, and stuff like that.

Our nation building effort never gets on television either. Very seldom does pacification work get on television. Unfortunately, I think the media of television has caused this war to be misunderstood as much as anything else. For many reasons. First of all, a large part of the war is the guerrilla warfare, fought at night, which the television cameraman never gets a look at. Another twenty-five or thirty percent of that war is in remote areas, and you don't get a look at that. So you're getting a television picture, probably, of bits and pieces of about twenty percent of the war--maybe fifteen percent of the war. And they only pick the dramatic action out of that. So that's what you're getting on your television screen here in the United States, and it certainly isn't a true picture of the war.

I was astonished when I came home after two years out there and watched what went on on television--even heard over radio. I couldn't recognize it as the same war I'd been in for two years. It's that much different.

M: Is this, you think, a technical problem, or is this some choice on the part of the TV journalists?

W: Well, the thing that aggravates it is this, and it's something we haven't faced up to yet. The enemy, ever since he started that war, has done a wonderful job on psychological warfare--propaganda, or whatever you call it. That's as important, if not more important, to him than the guns on the battlefield. This major I was speaking of a minute ago told me--he

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said, "We consider the United States as much a part of this battlefield as South Viet Nam, because this is a psychological-political war as well as a military war."

Now, we have never faced up to this. So all the time their psychological warfare has been coming against us here in the United States. Unfortunately, many of our news media--some of them unwittingly, some of them to make headlines--have picked up this propaganda and promulgated it all over the country--all over the world! And people have believed it.

Let me give you an example: In March 1966 the enemy tried to take Quang Tri City. He had a long series of attacks planned across the DMZ, and none of them were successful. But the final objective was Quang Tri City. Now the night that he was supposed to have attacked Quang Tri City, he stated over radio from Hanoi about how his troops had come in and overrun Quang Tri City, had taken over the city, and that his battalions were camped in the street of Quang Tri.

M: This was before the attack?

W: Before the attack, yes, or at about the same time as the attack. Well, actually a small force attacked Quang Tri City that night. One platoon of them got inside the city limits. One platoon is all! About seven or eight of these people got into the jail and opened up the jail and turned the prisoners loose. But that was all.

I was on the radio all night that night--by morning I was receiving queries from the United States about how serious is this takeover in Quang Tri City? What are you going to do about it and so on? I told them that I didn't think they had taken over Quang Tri City,

because I was in Danang, about sixty miles south and had communication with our troops in Quang Tri City.

"Well," they said, "They have taken over Quang Tri City."

So I got in a helicopter and picked up the First ARVN Division commander, and we flew up to Quang Tri City early that morning. When we got there, we went into the city, we walked down the streets, walked all over the city. We went over to see the jail, went over to the corner of the city where this platoon had gotten in. They had tried to destroy some artillery pieces. They had failed. They had been killed in this attempt. Then we went back down to Hue City, and then I went on back to Danang. When I got to Danang, there was a message waiting for me there wanting to know how long it was going to take for us to drive the enemy battalions out of Quang Tri City.

Now you see what happened! The enemy's propaganda was picked up, promulgated back in the States. It became news, it became "facts" here in the States when it was not facts at all. And as the Communist doctrine says, it doesn't matter whether you win a battle or not. The thing that matters is whether your people think you won.

M: It's what the people think, not what happens, that's important?

W: That's right.

M: Does this explain the generally critical point of view that many of the newsmen have expressed who have been over in Viet Nam themselves for long periods of time? Have they bought the story that has been given them as part of a conscious policy?

W: There are two groups of newsmen. Some of them who have been over there-- I won't name names, but I could--some of them have been over there a long time and know the entire story. And they will tell you the same thing I'm telling you. Let me give you an example--Jim Lucas. Now, Jim Lucas spent three and a half years over there. He knows this war from the

squad clear up to the division better than anybody I know. There are others, too. Bob Miller, UPI, is another one. There are a lot of others. The ones that got out and got down into the paddies with the villagers and the hamlet people, they understood the war.

Now this war is a rice roots war, I guess. It's fought on a very low level because that's the way the Communists came in and took over the country, and that's the way you're going to have to get them out--on that level. And you can't look up into the sky and see what's going on down on the ground. And you can't sit behind a bar or a press box or something like that in a city out there and know what's going on in the country, because this war is being fought primarily in the country. It's not really being fought in the cities with few exceptions. The only time it has been in the cities was during the TET offensive, and some city people got a pretty good look at the war then. And some of them did pretty doggone good reporting, and some of them turned around one hundred and eighty degrees in their opinions from what they were before.

M: I remember that. In the times you talked to President Johnson--you mentioned a couple of instances--did he display any personal interest in such things as tactics; that is, what the operations of the soldiers in the field were at any given time?

W: The first time I had a chance to talk to President Johnson, I think I had a fifteen or twenty minute appointment with him. He kept me an hour-and-a-half or an hour-and-forty-five minutes. Ninety percent of that time I was talking to him and he was asking questions about the guerrilla-type warfare, the thing that was really tough out there in Viet Nam. The President in my estimation displayed a great deal of knowledge--

concrete knowledge--on what that war is about. I think the reason I got to stay with him so long was because I was verifying some of the beliefs which he had gleaned from other areas. The things I told him then, I would tell him today, because the things I told him were exactly right; and they've proven to be right--we're not going to get that war over until we get down on that grassroots level and get those hamlets and villages back on their feet. It's got to be done. There's no easy way of doing it. We're not going to get that war over and that country strong until we get the kids educated. I took a great deal of interest in the health of the people and the educational processes out there. It's extremely important.

We have other problems out there. We have a problem of teaching the Vietnamese people how to administer their government--that's true. But, also, I have a great deal of confidence in the Vietnamese people. I think a lot of their potential. I think they've got great potential, and given an opportunity they're going to show the world that they can be a strong nation--a viable nation, and a wealthy nation, because they've got the resources and potential to have a wealthy nation. But they just haven't had an opportunity. You don't realize how much an education means in a country until you see a country like South Viet Nam where there's such a lack of education.

M: Did Mr. Johnson seem to you to realize the hard realities, or did he look for the bright side? Did he want good news--?

W: No, he wanted the facts. And all of his questions pointed towards facts. He wasn't looking for good news. He was looking for facts. He was trying to evaluate, I am sure, as we all do, what was the nature of this

war so we'd know how long it was going to last, and what we have to do to win it.

M: Was that true of your normal reporting procedures? Did you tell it like it was, more-or-less?

W: Absolutely. I always have.

M: Without emphasizing the positive side?

W: I've made pretty near five hundred speeches around over the country since I came back in June 1967, and I've always told it exactly like it is-- and was. And I've concentrated on the basic fundamentals of the nature of the war in South Viet Nam. And I have found the audiences are all very, very interested and very receptive because most of them haven't understood what the war in Viet Nam is about. They haven't understood how it differs from other wars that we have been in. They haven't understood what we mean by subversive forces taking over the countryside, and how they have a death grip on the people in the countryside. This is what interests the people. The people in the United States today are interested in this factor, and they're also interested in what we are doing to help these people get back on their feet. I find that ninety percent of the people I talk to are willing to do whatever is necessary in order to help those Vietnamese people get back on their feet and get their country to where it has its own choice of government. I don't care what it was.

M: Some of the critics of the war, the ones that are called simplistically, I think, hawks--those who want to do more than we're doing--have frequently criticized the President and his civilian advisers for hampering the military's operation in important ways. Do you think this is

an accurate charge?

W: I'm sure that we can all look back--and the President said this himself, when you look back you see things you might have done better. But as I look back on this war, I think we've been on the right track. Maybe we haven't gone fast enough. I don't know. But we've been on the right track and I think that if we stay on this right track, we're going to win it hands down. We've got the military objectives in hand out there now, and it's just a matter of time until they get the rest of the objectives completed.

M: You don't think that there are important instances where the military could have done certain successful things if the civilians hadn't been holding back on the reins here in Washington?

W: I don't think, and I've said this many times--me as a military man, I cannot evaluate that. Now the military, I know, would have liked to have done heavier bombing up north. They would have liked to close the port, and things like this. To us from the military point of view, this was the way to stop that war.

On the other hand, I think most of us realize that this war is something more than just a military war. The political factors in it are as important as the military factors--maybe more so. I've always been taught that the military is an instrument to carry out the political objectives. If you stick to that premise, we have to realize that our political objective in South Viet Nam is to help that country to have its form of government without pressure from the outside. And what we're trying to do militarily is keep that pressure off them from the outside. If that's our mission, and if that's the way we can best carry

out our mission in helping the nation of South Viet Nam to achieve their political objectives, then I think we've done the right thing.

M: I think you were back here and coming into this position at the beginning of this year--was there an appreciable difference in the way the civilian operated Pentagon behaved and made policy between Mr. McNamara and Mr. Clifford? Any changes that affected the military situation?

W: I didn't see any particular difference. I don't think there was any difference.

M: Some of Mr. Johnson's critics always claim--the critics on the other side this time, the ones who oppose the war--always made the point that he was what they called captive of the military. Do you think that's a fair statement?

W: I do not. I don't think that President Johnson is a captive of anybody. I think he tried to objectively view the points of view of everybody. I know that when I talked to him he listened to every word I had to say. He didn't buy everything I said, of course, but he heard what I had to say. And I'm sure that he had somebody from the other side telling him everything they had to say, and he evaluated the two.

M: There have been some instances of high ranking Marine Corps officers who have expressed doubts about the war--I think a former commandant is among them. Is there an appreciable amount of sentiment among high ranking Marine Corps officers who feel that the war was perhaps a miscalculation?

W: Indeed not. You're talking about General Shoup. I had discussions with General Shoup after he made these statements. General Shoup, although

he had a fairly good understanding of the situation in Asia and Southeast Asia, he didn't understand the nature of the war in South Viet Nam. He didn't understand what we were trying to do out there.

M: He had not been out there in command--?

W: No, he had never been out [there] in command. He had been out there earlier, several years earlier. But I didn't understand that war for the first six months I was out there. I didn't understand that war until I got down and talked to some of the elders in the villages and the hamlets and heard their side of the story. I didn't understand the war until I talked to some of the missionaries who'd been out in that country for thirty years. They told me the entire story of the war, and what happened in the country.

M: Are there still a lot of those people out there?

W: Yes, there are.

M: Non-military type?

W: Non-military. Civilian missionaries. This was one of my best sources of understanding what had happened to that country, and what we had to do in order to rectify what had happened.

M: What about men in the ranks, enlisted men, and their views on the war? Do many of them have doubts about its' usefulness, or its advisability?

W: There has been a poll taken in the Marine Corps here within the last six months of the Marines who've been out there and who've come back. Ninety-eight percent of them say that we should be in Viet Nam. We've got a job to do there, and most of them want to go back and help do that job.

Now we've had over forty thousand of our Marines who voluntarily

extended their tour of duty out there--at least six months, some of them a year or a year-and-a-half. In the month of December 1968, over three thousand of our Marines voluntarily extended at least six months to stay on out there. Why? You ask them why! "Because there's a job here that has to be done, and I want to be the one to help do it."

M: In instances where a few have dissented, has that been tolerated to a reasonable point?

W: We haven't had much dissension in the Marine Corps actually. We've had a few guys chaining themselves to churches and things like that--three or four maybe--but in the Marine Corps we've had no real problems at all.

M: That may be because of the nature of the Marine Corps. The other services apparently have had more.

W: When people ask me sometimes, "How do you know the Marines really believe in what they're doing out there" I tell them a story. One of our black sergeants one day, who had been working in a pacification program, after he had finished his six months tour with the rifle company--he worked in the pacification program--a good man, and he believed in what he was doing. As I recall, he had three children. He stepped on a mine. He lost both of his legs and arms. And he was lying in the hospital when I went in to see him. I saw him when he came out of the operating room, and I stayed there for about an hour. I went back that evening and talked to him again.

And you know what that man said to me was this: "General, whatever you do, don't let them stop until we've got this job finished. These people need us so bad. I'm only sorry that I can't stay here to help you."

And the sergeant died ten minutes after he said that. Now, here's a man with a family--shot to pieces in this war--and that's the way he felt about it.

M: I notice that with the new Administration coming in one of the programs that Mr. Nixon talked about, and there are now some Congressmen talking about it, is trying to convert to a volunteer force. The Marine Corps has been a volunteer force for a good many years already. In a war like this, do you think there are distinct advantages to being a voluntary force?

W: Oh, I think there is in any war, actually. Napoleon used to say morale is to the physical as three is to one. If you've got a man who volunteers to do something, he's going to do a better job at it, I think, than the average man that isn't a volunteer. I don't think you'll ever be able to pay men to defend this country of ours. You couldn't pay me enough to be in the military if I didn't believe in what I was doing. If I didn't believe it was a real important job you couldn't pay me enough, and I think most of my Marines feel the same way. I think as long as we feel that way, we're going to volunteer for this type service. I think that it's good that we do have volunteers.

M: So the secret then is not what they're talking about up on the Hill, just pay more money. That alone wouldn't create a satisfactory, or adequate volunteer force, according to what you say, is that correct?

W: Well, it might not get you the right kind of people. Remember the Roman Empire? It got to where all the Romans didn't want to do any fighting, so they hired other people to fight. Then what happened! Those other people took over.

M: They learned how to do it and then took them over.

W: Our liberty and our freedom that we have in this country is so precious

and so dear and so vital to us that I don't think we can turn the job over to somebody who isn't really interested in doing it. That's the way I feel about it.

M: I wonder if you could explain for this tape a little bit about the idea that you had in regard to the Marine Corps oral history program that has gotten such favorable publicity everywhere. You said you were one of the ones who originated the program in Viet Nam?

W: Well, I was strong for it. That war out in Viet Nam--. In the first place, it was the first time I had been in a war where we went ashore and stayed long enough to start thinking about these things. In World War II and Korea we were there for quite awhile. We'd go in and we'd come out. But we didn't have a chance to get organized in all these history recording things like we did in Viet Nam.

But in Viet Nam it was such a complicated war. There were so many actions going on every day and every night. There were thousands of heroes out there that you never hear about. I just thought it was real important that we start collecting some of this information, and found that tape was one of the easiest ways to do it.

Take for an example, we sent a sergeant out on patrol. He'd go out on patrol. He'd have an action with the enemy. He'd come back maybe two or three days later and he'd have a terrific story to tell. He could sit down, if I'd ask him to tell me the story, and while he told me the story I had the tape recorder going. And it turned out to be a real good way to collect facts and stories and information that we'd never done before. So many of these details have gotten away from us. So I think it is a good thing.

It takes a lot of sifting out. We've got thousands and thousands of tapes that have to be listened to. Some parts of it we have to cut out because it's not worth keeping. That's true, but at least we have the facts there. If we can sift them out, we've got them, and we can take plenty of time to do it. We haven't lost it. It's there!

M: And you see this as something useful for the future for putting together, or something that's useful now?

W: Both. It has been useful now. It has helped us a great deal in our training program with these men who are going over to Viet Nam. We've used these tapes. We've used these experiences as training vehicles. So it has helped us that way a great deal. Of course, as far as putting the history of the war together, it's going to be helpful too. And I think in studying the tactics and techniques that are used in this war through this historical process [it] is going to be helpful to us in the years to come.

M: Of course, we're in a position when we're preparing to talk to someone of being pretty well at the mercy of what's published about them, and I certainly don't want to limit you or cut you off by any means. Are there any areas of conversation that you think might be important to record-- either where you've touched the career of President Johnson, or anything in connection with your service in Viet Nam during his Administration-- that we haven't talked about?

W: Outside of the times that I saw President Johnson--that I spoke of, once in Viet Nam and once here in February 1966--when I came back in June '67 I again had a long conference with the President of about an hour. Again I went over with him, in detail, the nature of the war as I saw it and

how we were progressing in this war. Again he was extremely interested and asked very, very pertinent questions.

M: Could you tell that his views had changed in any way--one direction or another?

W: No, I didn't discern that his views had changed at all. I felt that he was even more knowledgeable about the war than he had been before--had a better understanding of it. He asked me to go and talk to many other people. At that time he asked me to start talking around the country and telling the people the same story I had told him, which I have done. This is where I got on this talking route. Did darned near one a day for the first year. It has been very interesting actually.

But I've seen the President several times since that time. I was fortunate enough to go with him on a trip to the West Coast--first to Fort Bragg, the 82nd Airborne, and then out to the West Coast--right after the TET offensive started when we had to send additional troops out to Viet Nam and he went to see these troops off. I spent a couple of days with him then and listened to him talk to those troops and had an opportunity to talk to him throughout the trip on Viet Nam and other problems.

M: He never expressed any doubts about the course of action that he'd set out during those conversations?

W: No, not at all. If you'll recall, at that time when he went to the West Coast, was the time when Khe Sanh was under seige.

M: That was formerly in your area when you were there?

W: That's right. And one of the first things that he asked me when we got on the airplane, "Are the Marines going to hold Khe Sanh?"

I told him, "Yes." There wasn't any question about it in my mind because I knew Khe Sanh. I was there. I had agreed with General Westmoreland when we decided to hold the place because I think it was very important that we hold the place, and it turned out to be that it was.

If we hadn't had Khe Sanh during that TET offensive there would have been two-and-a-half more divisions of enemy troops down there in Hue City, because we were holding up two-and-a-half divisions of them that were trying to take Khe Sanh and they couldn't do it. They lost pretty near fifteen thousand men by trying to take Khe Sanh. We lost one hundred and ninety-nine men. That was a great loss to them and a tremendous tactical-strategic advantage to us.

M: The stories here, as I recall them, were that Khe Sanh was strategically unimportant.

W: Extremely important!

M: That explains, I think, why later it was possible to withdraw from Khe Sanh without any strategic loss?

W: There were several reasons. I wouldn't have put Khe Sanh base where it was had the enemy had his long-range artillery that he had later on. When we established Khe Sanh base, the enemy didn't have the artillery. He didn't have the long-range rockets at that time. Later on Khe Sanh came in range of both the rockets and the artillery from enemy territory. The artillery out of North Viet Nam could shoot on Khe Sanh. This made quite a difference. Another thing was that I didn't have as many troops out there at that time that they had later on when they started the mobile concept. If I had had the troops out there, I would never have established Khe Sanh because I would always have had enough troops I could throw in. But I didn't

have that many at that time, and when you're short of troops you've got to use fire power. And that's what I used. I put artillery and troops in there at Khe Sanh and by patrolling out from Khe Sanh we controlled the area.

M: Then its strategic importance was great in the TET offensive?

W: Extremely great, extremely effective.

M: I don't think that connection was made.

W: Extremely effective. As I say, the enemy lost fifteen thousand troops in trying to take Khe Sanh. He didn't take it, and after he had already announced he was going to take it. This was a great psychological defeat for him besides being a great military defeat.

Also, on that trip to the West Coast with President Johnson, I had an opportunity to go with him to see President Eisenhower. I briefed President Eisenhower on the Viet Nam situation as I saw it. He came out and asked me the same question; he said, "General Walt, are we going to hold Khe Sanh?"

I said, "Yes, sir, we are!" And I never doubted but what we'd hold Khe Sanh. We had every advantage.

It being compared to Dien Bien Phu was totally inaccurate. It wasn't a Dien Bien Phu in any sense of the word. We had artillery fire completely circling Khe Sanh from bases in rear. We had a wealth of air power. Khe Sanh was being supplied and casualties taken out every day. During the month of March when Khe Sanh was supposed to have been really down and out, I checked up on the statistics. During those days according to the press reports you would have thought that every airplane that went into Khe Sanh got hit or knocked down.

M: Right, I remember those.

W: Well, let me tell you the truth. During that month there were nine hundred and forty-six aircraft--fixed wing and helicopter--that went in and out of Khe Sanh. Forty-six of them were shot at. Eight of them were hit. Four of them were knocked down. Two of them were destroyed--out of nine hundred and forty-six.

M: Those are the ones that we saw pictures of.

W: Those aircraft that were knocked down and destroyed, there were pictures taken of them. They were shown on TV for a week afterwards from every angle. Khe Sanh was never in doubt.

M: Now this time when you went to the West Coast, this was less than sixty days prior to the time Mr. Johnson announced the partial bombing halt on March 31st. Did he give you any indication on this trip that this was an immediate prospect?

W: No, I don't recall that he did, not at all.

M: What was the military effect of that partial bombing halt on the military situation in the area right next to the DMZ there?

W: We haven't suffered from it. We've been able to fire back every time they fired across the DMZ. They've built up considerable supplies across the DMZ. Maybe they're trying to take advantage of the situation. I don't know. But so far I don't think we've taken any additional casualties, or I don't think it has affected us in any way at all.

M: Would that have been true had the bombing been stopped, say, six months earlier, or nine months earlier, or at some earlier time?

W: Had it been stopped before the TET offensive, yes, it certainly would have made all the difference in the world. They would have had a lot

more supplies and staying power had they been able to push all that stuff down there with those additional troops that went in at that time.

M: What about the Paris talks? Do they influence the military situation greatly?

W: I don't think anything is going to happen in Paris that isn't a reflection of what has happened on the battlefield in Viet Nam. Viet Nam is the problem, and everything that happens in Paris is going to be a reflection of that.

M: Does that affect the morale of the boys who are doing the fighting, the fact that peace talks are going on? You mentioned they were very conscious of the previous dissent in the United States.

W: I just told you that during the month of December 1968 we had three thousand Marines that volunteered to extend. This was thirty percent more than we ever had extend in any month prior to that time.

M: So if it's hurting them, it's not doing anything--

W: The morale is the highest I've ever seen it. I was out there just last November. It was the highest I've ever seen it.

M: Is there anything else you'd like to add, General Walt?

W: No, I don't think so. I just want to say this in deference to President Johnson--and I think a lot of military men feel the same way--that he had a lot of pressures on him from a lot of angles to stop the bombing. We were very, very grateful that he didn't until the time he did. Because as I said, it would have been an entirely different story. I think it took awfully strong character on his part to resist these pressures and to do what he knew was right.

M: I certainly thank you for cooperating, General. It's mighty nice of you to give us the time.

W: Thank you, sir.

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By General L. W. Walt

to the

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