John A. Adams '71 Center for Military History and Strategic Analysis.
Military Oral History Project.
Interview with Steven M. Yedinak by Cadet John Maurice. March 11, 2010

Maurice – This interview is being conducted for the John A. Adams '71 Center for Military History and Strategic Analysis as part of the requirements for History 386—U.S. Military History Since 1919. The interviewer is John Maurice. The interviewee is Steven M. Yedinak. Today is 11 March 2010. We are conducting this meeting via telephone.

Maurice – Do you remember why you started doing Army ROTC back in college? What motivated you?

Yedinak – Gonzaga University was one of 287 land grant colleges nationwide and ROTC at these land grant colleges was compulsive. The federal government subsidized, in those days, the ROTC programs of those colleges that accepted the requirements of being a land grant college so that, in effect, they could implement a ROTC program. That's the short answer.

Maurice – What sort of things did the ROTC program there have you doing?

Yedinak – We had a small Army ROTC department, a staff of about five, headed by a PMS who was a lieutenant colonel, and mostly Korean war veteran NCOs. Unlike, at VMI, we cadets ran the entire show. We were the ones accepting guidance. We had a cadet brigade of two battalions and the school was only about 2,500 strong, so the females weren't required to participate. The brigade numbered about 1,500, similar, maybe, to what VMI has. The cadet brigade commander and his staff had the authority to run the program under the guidance of the PMS and his staff.

We had MS-1 through MS-4 subjects, as you do at VMI, so we learned how to march, form up, identify rank and authority, follow, lead, understand basic map reading and compass and military history. We didn't do as much as you, with Rat challenge and a far more active cadet corps. In fact, during my senior year, as brigade S-3, (OPs officer), I located an area nearby Gonzaga where we could conduct a

three or four day FTX. We did that, but we certainly weren't able to reap the rewards of such an extensive program in ROTC as VMI.

Maurice – What did you do for the Army following graduation?

Yedinak – I got my orders to report to Ft. Benning in September of 1963, right after I graduated. I went to infantry officer basic, airborne school, and then reported to Ft. Ord, California where, for three years, I was a training officer, and then a company commander in two different companies. We were conducting basic combat training (BCT), advanced individual training (AIT), basic unit training (BUT), and advanced unit training (AUT), FTXs and those kinds of things, getting troops ready for Vietnam.

Maurice – What types of things were done during all these various training evolutions?

Yedinak – You start at the beginning, almost like VMI. A lieutenant in those units—as a training officer, which I was, initially—is like a God. We first trained that they needed to stay healthy. For example, we didn't allow smoking in the company for which I was a training officer. You couldn't smoke during the training day. We thought smoking jeopardized someone's health and we weren't able to let that happen because, when you go in the field, people who smoke, characteristically, give themselves away by the way they smell, or they give themselves away by coughing. We thought smoking led to upper respiratory infection, so we didn't allow smoking. As a training officer lieutenant, I gave out 20 Article 15s one afternoon for troops that broke ranks and smoked during a break during training. Tough, but necessary.

We trained from about 0600 in the morning to around 1800 or 1900—all the basic individual tactical skills, map reading, compass, how to walk, how to protect, how to find cover, and basic rifle marksmanship for seven days. We had the M-14 then. For the advanced individual training in infantry, more weapons systems, like the .50 caliber rifle, rocket launchers (M20) and introduction to artillery and fire support. For the basic unit and advanced unit training, we were teaching soldiers and units how to organize, from the fire team up to the company level; how to go out in the woods; how to prepare shelters; how to secure assembly areas. We taught tactics, how to move from one assembly area to a

line departure, routes of advance, and all the tactics from the individual soldier on up through company tactics. You know, move, shoot, communicate.

Maurice – How did you get involved in Special Forces?

Yedinak – That's an interesting question. My first company commander was a Korean War veteran. His name was Eric I. McIntosh from San Francisco. He and I didn't hit it off initially, but after three or four months—I was a hard worker, as was he—we worked together to build good units. He moved to G-3 and I took over headquarters company. He called one afternoon and asked if I wanted to go to a Special Forces Orientation Course at Ft. Bragg, North Carolina. I said, "Yeah, does a bear shit in the woods?" He says "O.K. I have two slots. I'll give you one." They cut orders and I went for a two week course. That was in 1964 or 1965. I remember that Vietnam was just building and we had American and British officers and other government agents coming to brief and let us know what was ongoing around the world, including Vietnam.

It was just a two week course and I returned to Ft. Ord and was asked if I wanted to go back for the five month Special Forces Officer Course (SFOC). At that time, Special Forces was a prefix-three, not a full specialty code, like it is today. I said "Sure." So I went back towards the end of my Ft. Ord tour, graduated from that qualification course, went back to Ft. Ord and shortly thereafter received orders for Vietnam.

Maurice – At what point did it become obvious that you, as a Special Forces soldier, would be sent to Vietnam eventually?

Yedinak – When I was at Ft. Bragg, when you finish the Q-Course, each graduate has 15 minutes with an infantry branch assignment officer. My assignment officer said "We're going to send you to the 8th Special Forces group in Panama." I said "I'm going to Vietnam." He said "O.K." That was it.

Maurice – So you volunteered to go to over to Vietnam then?

Yedinak – I just told him that's where I was going. They liked that sort of thing then. Yeah.

Maurice – When did you do your first tour in Vietnam?

Yedinak – I got over there March 17, 1966 and came back 22 February 1967.

Maurice – Where were you stationed in Vietnam?

Yedinak – Initially I went to 5th Special Forces group, our headquarters in Nga Trang, for an in-country briefing and assignment to our C-Team in III Corps Tactical Zone. There were four C teams, one in each Corps tactical area—one through four—and C-3 was located in Bien Hoa. I was assistant operations officer for three months.

Maurice – What's a C-Team?

Yedinak – The C-Teams were the higher headquarters for three or four B-Teams, and each B-Team, in a different location in-country, was the higher headquarters for four or five A-Teams. The A-Team is the building block within Special Forces, 10 to 12 personnel. It's just a way of organizing and executing the missions that came down from higher headquarters.

Maurice – What was the overall mission of the 5th Special Forces group?

Yedinak – I would say the counter insurgency. What we learned in school was that there were three requirements for insurgency. One is a vulnerable society. A second requirement is popular discontent, and certainly that was growing within South Vietnam, predicated on the emergence of a leader, which is a third requirement. Eventually they were able to swing American influence such that, although the U.S. certainly won this counterinsurgency militarily, we backed away as a nation. I'd say counterinsurgency, but there were a lot of secrets within Special Forces. A lot of secret, clandestine type missions.

A couple that I got in on later were more specific to a task, like the recovery of the system 13-A device from a U-2 spy plane and another one going into an enemy area and living there and locating large enemy troop concentrations and calling in F-4C Phantom jets to destroy large concentrations. Some of those were just direction missions, within a counterinsurgency framework.

Maurice – Did you ever work hand-in-hand with the Vietnamese?

Yedinak – Absolutely. My first job as an assistant operations officer for the C-Team, I had a counterpart and he and I worked very closely together, as did our staff with the Vietnamese. When I went to take over an A-Team at Saoi Da, that's where you have about 12 to 14 Americans and you have a similar complement of Luc Luong Dac Biet, which is the Vietnamese Special Forces teams. We worked

very closely together because, in those missions, we were in an advisory capacity. They were taking our advice, hopefully, and getting operations started. When they conducted tactical missions—a lot of them were called search and destroy, and ambush, and some other different types of missions—but when they conducted those missions, two or three of our Special Forces advisors would accompany to help with intelligence activities, communication, fire support, and medical evacuation. And, of course, tactical guidance.

Maurice – How did you feel the South Vietnamese Special Forces operated? Did they operate on par with American, or did you feel they weren't as interested in the counterinsurgency as the American troops were?

Yedinak – In that part of the world they'd been fighting this war for a long time, going all the way back to the French Indochina War (1948-54), and historically many hundreds of years earlier. It's hard to expect them to be as locked on into pushing military operations as you would expect of the Special Forces A-Team. It's just coming over there for a year and then going back, or maybe going back a second or third time, but not living there the whole time. I thought they were more cautious and, in most cases, less likely to want to conduct extensive operations, meaning away from home. I think they saw their first responsibility as protecting and securing their families and the A camp in which they lived and the local area, which is maybe three to five clicks out. Whenever you asked them to consider operations beyond that, then I think there were questions. You had to be knowledgeable enough to know what the benefits were and how the benefits in the long run might outweigh their concerns.

For example, if you had pretty good intelligence that there was NVA or main force VC units massing 23 kilometers north of their camp, then that was a pretty good reason to go out and make contact and reach them and use U.S. and VNF air power and artillery, etc. to disband or defeat those units. In this way, denying the larger unit's advance to locate and destroy their camps.

Maurice – When out on missions, did you feel that the Vietnamese Special Forces were trustworthy when under fire?

Yedinak – Yes, for the most part. What I've learned is that, whenever there is a fire fight, there are three kinds of human beings in uniform. There are those who instinctively move forward to try to

develop the situation, there are those who are more cautious and look rearward for cover, and then there are those who are in between, I guess. They stay about where they are and seek cover and try to react to what's happening. I think you can find that in American units as well. Understand that the Vietnamese were fighting Vietnamese, pretty much like our Civil War.

Maurice – What was your impression of the Viet Cong?

Yedinak – I thought they were good. They did a lot with very little. They had ingenious ways of taking and using what we threw away. They certainly had the advantage of knowing the area. They certainly knew the mountains, creeks, rivers and trail systems. They did not have the same kind of weapons we had, and they certainly didn't have the radio equipment we had. For example, most of them had MAS-36 old French rifles, bolt action, single shot, not very effective. We had M-16s and carbines, also more sophisticated weapons—some secret. We might have standardized frag-grenades, CS, gas, and the rest of that, the M-249, different kind of weapon systems and good radios and they didn't have all that. I thought they were very formidable for what they had.

Maurice – Were you ever able to turn Viet Cong agents and use intelligence they got effectively?

Yedinak – Sure. On different kinds of missions, when you're working as an advisor, you have to work within the conventional system, so if you capture someone, you have to process that person and you can do something at the moment at the site, in terms of tactical value and pass the information up. But if the person usually leaves you, you pass that person up through the chain of command, and, of course, if he's a normal, regular soldier, he doesn't know very much. If he's a leader, then he knows more. On those kinds of missions for which you are an adviser, then you also have to teach them the rudiments of conventional combat. That you can't just capture somebody and waste them.

Maurice – At what time did you start up the mobile guerilla force?

Yedinak – That was around July or August of 1966. The mobile guerilla force was designed to infiltrate enemy controlled areas for extended periods, to deny their use by North Vietnamese units. MOF trained, equipped and deployed and commanded, a small indigeous force made up of Cambodians, without support and benefit of medical evacuation, nor artillery or air support. I left Suoi Da and was

asked to come to C-3 to attend a briefing, during which that was discussed. I was asked if I wanted to do it and I said "Of course." So, early on, I began to recruit from within Special Forces A-Teams and we were told that, in fact, the Rhmer Serei—the Cambodian organization in Saigon—would authorize us to personally recruit Cambodians from the various A camps in III Corps Tactical Zone, so that's what we started to do.

Maurice – What influenced the creation of the mobile guerilla force?

Yedinak – There were those amongst our infantry who thought counterinsurgency operations were certainly more legitimate in that kind of environment and that situation than were large, conventional operations. So it was pushed by Hackworth and others to conduct more light-to-fight, clandestine, more secret missions, using ethnic forces to the extent we could. Finally, General Westmoreland gave us the green light on the creation of the mobile guerilla force. Following the success of Blackjack 31 I was asked to stay in 'Nam to command another company but my tour was up and I returned to my family in the U.S.

There was an evolutionary change in the next two years from one or two small mobile guerilla force operational missions, to an expanding of the concept all over Vietnam. Of course, the more you do that, the more they (the VC and NVA) learn about it, and the more difficult these missions are to achieve success.

Maurice – Are there any big lessons you learned during your first tour?

Yedinak – Yes, I suppose so. I think one is that you've got to be bold. You can't take anything for granted. You have to be patient. You have to be in good health and in good physical condition. I think, particularly, the Black Jack 31 mission where we lived in their homeland, so to speak, their environment, for a long time—I think you have to be confident. If you're not confident that you can work alone—for example, working with Cambodians, we were often, by design or otherwise, asked to be a sole American or in some cases, two Americans, for a Cambodian platoon-size unit—35 or 40 guys. You didn't speak the language and although you had an interpreter, you had to be pretty confident that they were with you. For the most part, I think the Cambodians were.

We recruited 250, initially, but when we finished the training and announced the first mission, I think we lost about 100 because they may have well just come forward for the training and the money.

We paid the Cambodians three times as much as the average Vietnamese soldier made in the Vietnamese Army. They might have come for the money and security for their family. They also may have thought we were training them to go back into Cambodia and repatriate some of their families and to kick the shit out of the Khmer Rouge or the Communist Cambodian elements. To undermine the Poi Pot regime.

I think you learn a lot. You learn that life is very interesting on a day to day basis and you certainly can't shy away from what's to be done. We used all kinds of tricks, for example, to break contact. We practiced, routinely, in our secret training area for 49 days at Ho Ngoc Tao, lots of way to disengage from combat. We used goggles and secret formula protective masks as a safeguard against nerve agents. We used the Claymore and smoke and other tools to move backward and, eventually, to fade away. One learns that he who knows he need not stay, lives to fight another day.

One of the lessons is that you have to be proficient, not only in use of different weapons, but you also have to be proficient in the kinds of tactics that you employ, and for that I give a lot of credit to a guy named Bo Gritz, who possibly was one of the Army's foremost technicians. He is a guy who came in to the old 77 Special Forces group as a 16, 17 year old kid and learned the ropes. I was privileged to have been able to work with him and learn from him the kinds of tactics and techniques that might not only be successful, but might keep us safe and relatively secure.

Maurice – I just want to transition now to the time you spent back home, between your two tours. What did you do for the Army during that time period?

Yedinak – After Vietnam I was assigned to Loyola University where I taught Army ROTC to the freshman class. Eleven sessions in military history for about three years. I also advised a Ranger and Special Forces student unit. After about three years I went to Ft. Benning for the career course and then back to Vietnam.

Maurice – Did you see a shift in training during that time period between your first and second tours?

Yedinak – Probably. I think when we went to Benning we were talking more about counterinsurgencies, but, believe it or not, there was still quite a bit of tactics being taught using large

conventional units and tank units, etc. Most of those didn't wear very well with the people who were there. They wanted more stuff on counterinsurgency because most of them knew they were going back to Vietnam.

Maurice – During your second tour, where were you stationed then?

Yedinak – I went to Advisory Team 50, which was a MAC-V team—Military Assistance Command Vietnam Team—and that team was commanded by a guy with whom a lot of people are familiar—David H. Hackworth. I met Hack in Cao Lanh and after a short period of time, became his G-3 adviser. He wanted us to conduct more counterinsurgency operations. He knew more about me than I knew about him at that point. He had worked in the Pentagon and he knew about the mobile guerilla force and he wanted that kind of thinking to influence operations in his role as an adviser.

Maurice – Where did the advisory team conduct operations?

Yedinak – We were in the Delta. IV Corps Tactical Zone, specifically, in Cao Lanh, Hackworth's headquarters. This was a small area near the seven-mountains area of Vietnam.

Maurice – Did you see a shift in the mission objectives from your first tour to your second tour?

Yedinak – Yes, I think that's true. I went back in 1971 to 1972 and I think there was more reality setting in. The American people were making their points known that they really didn't want a long-term engagement to continue in Vietnam. That's when Hackworth became very disturbed and really couldn't get much support for the kind of missions we were trying to conduct. He finally went public on those kinds of issues. The powers that be and General DuPuy and General Westmoreland were bringing in large conventional units and that's not what was required in Vietnam.

Maurice – What type of missions were you trying to operate that were being rejected?

Yedinak – We were trying to do some jitterbugging—use of helicopters, false insertions, getting the Vietnamese to stay out for longer periods of time. Again, American soldiers don't think much of going out three to five days or five to seven days or maybe a little longer, but the Vietnamese are more reluctant to do that. We were trying to get them out, conducting trail ambushes, conducting search and destroy type missions, based on good intelligence, trying to conduct some small unit attacks against known

enemy locations. In other ways, trying to disrupt what we thought was their program of trying to coopt and coerce the villagers.

Out in that kind of an area, you have a lot of people living out—let's call it out in the suburbs—with not much safety or security, so at night the main force VC and, in some cases, NVA, would slip in and try to coerce them and frighten them and try to get them to say where Americans were located. We would send medical patrols and other civil action type missions to some of these small villages and provide treatment and knowledge of growing and agriculture and things of that nature, to try to win the hearts and minds of the people.

Maurice – Do you think the hearts and mind campaign was effective at all?

Yedinak – Yes, I do. It's just hard to keep something like that stabilized. I think if you look at the obverse side of a coin and you happen to live in some part of America where you were constantly in fear of your daily life where people were coming in and disrupting your community, and where safety and security of your children and your livestock were always an issue. You'd be pretty hard pressed to know which way to turn. I think in these kinds of missions—and we're starting to do more of this in Afghanistan—you've got to work with the local people and you've got to convince them that, in fact, you're there to help them and that you can provide a level of safety and security and knowledge that the other people can't provide or don't want to provide.

Maurice – Following your second tour, what did you do for the Army then?

Yedinak – I came back from Vietnam the second time and went to 101st Airborne Division for five years. It was a very interesting five year stint. For 18 months I started and commanded a non-commissioned officer academy, building leaders we were losing as a result of Vietnam. After a year and a half I went to the 3rd Brigade Headquarters as Brigade S-2, or intelligence officer for about three or four months, and then I went to the down to the 187th Infantry Battalion, for about two and a half years. Initially, I was a battalion S-3 for about a year and a half and then I was a battalion exec for about a year.

Maurice – Was the NCO school an official school, or was it just 101st?

Yedinak – I think it was part of an entire non-commissioned officer academy system because there were similar schools at Ft. Bragg and Ft. Knox and Ft. Lewis, etc. Part of the Army's Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) mission was to build unit leaders.

Maurice – What kind of lessons were being taught at the NCO school?

Yedinak – We had to teach the fundamentals of leadership, probably what you guys get in MS-1 and MS-2 from the ground floor up—organizational leadership and how to make a difference in a unit. More book learning and not as many FTXs and that sort of thing, but just teaching leadership principles and then watching how those principles were transferred into action, creating a leadership reaction course, building character, making that a component of leadership.

Maurice – While you were the Brigade S-2, Battalion S-3 and XO of the 101st, were you still involved?

Yedinak – No. That was a battalion. I wasn't the division OPs officer, I was simply in a battalion.

Maurice – Were you still involved in what the big picture strategy was?

Yedinak - Yes, I think so. You go to a division like the 101st and they have certain parts of the world as part of their contingency mission, being a part of the 18th Airborne Corps. They were the only other airborne unit Stateside—the 82nd and the 101st—so we frequently worked out at Ft. Bragg and when I was down with the 187th we had an opportunity to go to Alaska for six weeks for some Arctic training. We had an opportunity to go to Panama for six weeks for jungle operations training, and we had a chance to go to Florida underbrush for counterinsurgency training, and also, Puerto Rico for that type of training. So, yes, I was pretty much kept informed.

Maurice – I was just wondering if you saw a shift at all in how the military and the U.S. Army thought about fighting wars, because a lot of what I receive from teachers now is that, following Vietnam, the U.S. Army pretty much wanted to ignore that Vietnam ever happened and didn't want to fight any more small wars, even though the CIA and the Marine Corps was still participating in various operations in South America.

Yedinak – That's a good point. You have to understand that we still had Special Forces and Special Forces units were committed all over the world. Probably, of interest, is that when I went to Ft. Leavenworth after my five years in the 101st, I went to the Command and General Staff College for a year and during that period of time (1977), the tactics, initially, were very much founded on the European battlefield and the old European maps and large conventional units, etc. Myself and others almost did an uprising, saying "What the hell are you guys thinking about? We're still fighting in these different places." And we got somewhere, I think. They finally started to get it, I think. We still have to teach conventional tactics but I don't think there was quite enough of the other.

When I left Leavenworth and came to TRADOC where I was on the higher level staff in development of leadership and tactical training, including the Army National Training Center (NTC) for conventional forces. One of my missions there, as a training officer, was to start the Light Force National Training Center (LFNTC) at Ft. Chaffy, Arkansas. We started to see a big shift then. From TRADOC, I went to Langley Air Force Base and helped start the Army-Air Force Center for Low-Intensity Conflict (A-AF/CLIC). We all had Airborne slots and we all had TSSCI clearances—TS is top secret; SCI is sensitive compartmented information. For about a year and a half to two years before I retired, I went all over Central and South America and places that you're talking about, where we were conducting Special Forces training for units in El Salvador and Honduras and Nicaragua. We spent a lot of time in Panama and other countries in that area. I think we fell asleep at the switch in terms of counterinsurgency from 1975 to about 1980 and then we came alive again with the introduction of lots of bad guy type units and different units that needed our support. That's when Special Forces became a specialty as opposed to being a Prefix-3 and that's when a Special Forces officer actually sat on the nine-member promotion boards and those in Special Forces got better treatment.

Today, in the Special Forces command slot in Afghanistan you've got a guy named Stanley McChrystal , who is a graduate of that system. You finally have somebody in a high enough position to know enough and do enough on a world wide scale.

Maurice – Would it be fair to say that you think the Soviet Union's involvement in Afghanistan saw a rebirth, maybe not counterinsurgency thinking, but how to support an insurgency?

Yedinak – Yes, I think it's fair to say that. I think, for a long time, we fell to the will of the American people and then we began to wake up again, knowing that, in fact, the world is a dangerous place and that there are all kinds of ways to undermine the security of the United States on a national basis all over the world, in getting into the war on terror. That's when Hackworth was working for Newsweek as a syndicated columnist and going to all those places. That's where we are now. First, 9/11, and counting. Now we're going to learn more about them because we got a lot of sleepers in this country and we have yet to feel the pain that has been dealt to some of our less fortunate neighbors in Europe and other places. When people start to see football stadiums and malls and other large concentrations of American people go up in smoke with suicide bombers, they'll start to get the message.

Maurice – Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Yedinak – I wrote a book to deal somewhat effectively with the scars of war. There is a lot of stuff that's probably in more detail and more reflects how I thought at different times. I suppose I would add that I'm encouraged that VMI has these kinds of conferences, these kinds of programs, where students are able to interview and discuss in real terms, and learn more about the historical evolution of warfare, right from Sunsu and 400 B.C. We all followed Sun Tzu for a long time and he had some great things to say. He said in 400 B.C. "My left is weak, my right is broken. Situation excellent. I attack." Our warfare and our leadership are most compatible and I've been blessed to work with guys like Bo Gritz, Tiger Honeycutt, and Dave Hackworth. Certainly not to leave any out, but I have dear friends in this area and throughout the United States with whom I share a brotherhood.

I think maybe one of the other things I learned is, if you're a young guy and you get asked to start something secret, make sure that's what you really want to do, because if things go south, you're not going to get much support. Anyway, good for VMI for doing this, and good for you for participating. Who is your history professor?

Maurice – Col. Malcolm Muir. I have to turn this in to him.