Early Inspiration at West Point

Interviewer

So, tell me where you grew up and how you got interested in the Army.

Snider

Well, I started on a farm in Ohio with no one in my family having any real military experience except one uncle. In and out of the Air Force, War II, and then Korea [the Korean War], and then ultimately retired as a lieutenant colonel. But I got into the military and went to West Point, really at the encouragement of my high school teachers. My brother and I were the first kids in our family to go to college. Our parents were not college graduates. Remarkable people. Very successful people. We grew up on a farm in southern Ohio raising Hereford cattle.

Don Snider

But my brother was the scientist, had a scholarship to Ohio State. I had a scholarship to Ohio State, but I didnâ€™t want to follow my brother anymore. Iâ€™d done enough of that. So when the opportunity and the appointment came to West Point I competed competitively in our district. When that opportunity came I said yeah, letâ€™s do this. So at a very early age, with very little knowledge of the military, I decided to go to the Academy and do something totally different than what my brother was doing and what I knew was potentially a good life.

Interviewer

So your first experience at West Point, when was the first time you saw it?

Snider

We went one visit before I entered as a cadet. And that was just a very short visit. In fact, as my wife and I have discussed this, I have very few recollections of that. I think it fair to say that the first time I really saw West Point, other than in the movies that were on television when I was in high school, was when I arrived to be a plebe in July of 1958.

Don Snider

I went with Dick Garvey and Jerry Comelos and other folks from the Cincinnati area because we all had competed together and gone though our physical exams together. And so we flew up on a big, super Constellation. And in those days, your parents didnâ€™t go with you. You basically went alone, arrived alone, and when through the process alone.

Interviewer

Who was your sponsor? Who was the Congressman or Senator who was your sponsor?

Snider

Brown. Congressman Brown from Southern Ohio. And then his son later replaced him, Clarence J. Brown, Jr. And he ran the process in his district basically by offering a civil service exam to any high school kid who wanted to take it. It was a purely academic merit-based approach. And so if you did well on the academic test then they advanced you for the physical aptitude test and the physical test, medical test. So I came out of that process as the primary nominee and accepted it. And from thereâ€”

Interviewer

Did you do sports?

Snider

In high school, I went to a very small high school. There were only 47 students in our graduating class. So we hadâ€”

Interviewer

Was this a public school or was this a private school?

Snider

Public school. Blanchester High School, Blanchester, Ohio. Small school. Barely offered foreign languages. So I went to the Academy with no foreign language background.

Don Snider

But it was strong in mathematics. And I had a really strong preparation in social sciences and political sciences, was what I was mostly interested in. But I had played basketball, baseball all the way through high school. And so was agile and adept. It was a great benefit all the time I was a cadet to be small and to be wiry and yet to be able to support your own weight climbing ropes, etc.

Interviewer

What was your Beast Barracks like?

Snider

Frankly, it was difficult. But the neat thing about it being so difficult was that I could look around and see everybody in an equal degree of misery that I was in. And there was an immense camaraderie that developed very quickly. But as far as the military things and what we were doing, it was all foreign to me. So I had really no strong positive or negative reaction to it.

Don Snider

I do remember all the way through being curious about the people I was going through Beast Barracks through who had already been in the Army. And throughout the companies there were some number of people who had come in through the enlisted ranks, gone to the prep school. And I remember very early on telling myself, watch these guys. They know whatâ€™s going on. You donâ€™t. You donâ€™t have the foggiest idea whatâ€™s going on. Take your cues from Ernie Webb and Jim Ellis and the guys who have been there and done that. And I think that was a tremendous touchstone for me to get through the process.

Interviewer

What class were you in?

Snider

What class?

Interviewer

You were the class of?

Snider

Oh, 1962.

Interviewer

â€™62.

Snider

We entered in â€™58 and graduated in â€™62.

Interviewer

So were you there for MacArthurâ€™s speech?

Snider

Yes. MacArthur spoke the spring of our senior year. Kennedy did our graduation speech.

Interviewer

Tell me about both of those. Tell me about MacArthurâ€™s speech andâ€“

Snider

Well, MacArthurâ€™s speech was profound. By that time, I had really worked hard academically. And knew a great deal more about the military. Was fascinated by the subject of civil-military relations, even then. We spent several years studying Huntington, bits and pieces of Huntington over the years in the military science courses. So MacArthur was an iconic figure to us. Just immensely so. And I was just taken with the idea that the President of the United States could fire him and that all of this had occurred. Like, how could all of this occur?

Don Snider

So when he came to give the speechâ€”incidentally, I had been at several other events with MacArthur because I sang in the Glee Club all four years. He lived in the Waldorf Astoria. And New York City Athletic Club had a birthday for him every year. And the Glee Club would always be invited down to celebrate MacArthurâ€™s birthday with him. So I had heard him speak on some other occasions, but those were much more informal occasions. When he spoke to the class, I remembered, clearly, one of my company mates, Bill Smith, and I walked back across the area going back to the room when it was over.

Don Snider

And our conversation between each other was weâ€™re not really sure how important this was, but itâ€™s very clear in our mind that that speech was so profound, so well put together, and of courseâ€”what we didnâ€™t knowâ€”so well rehearsed and presented, that it was intended as a watershed event in American civil-military relations, and ultimately served that purpose. We knew that then. You couldnâ€™t have observed what he was doing and the pace at which he was speaking, the brilliance of the language that he was using, how well it had been put together, and yet the emotion that was in it.

Interviewer

What was the theme of the speech?

Snider

The theme of the speech was what it means to be an officer

Don Snider

And it was a wonderful exposition from his life experiences of the nobleness of being a professional and being an officer and being of service to the republic. Itâ€™s still today, I still go back and extract a piece of it to speak to commissioning services for ROTC cadets. Because thereâ€™s a brilliance in the metaphorical language he used that just communicates so well these ideals that we want people to own in their heart, not just intellectually understand in their mind. Officership is about far more than the business of the mind. Itâ€™s about the habits of the heart. And he portrayed that for us that day in just an amazingly clear way.

Interviewer

What did the speech have to say about civil-military relations?

Snider

Not much, surprisingly. It was mostly about his experience in leading soldiers. And in the privilege of leading soldiers through mortal combat, the emotion of that, how deserving they were of the very best leadership that the republic could muster. That was the emotion that we all left with. Wow, donâ€™t do this incorrectly. This is far more than a job.

Interviewer

Was there an overtone, though, that suggested that Trumanâ€™s leadership maybe didnâ€™t reach that level of respect?

Don Snider

Snider: No. In fact, he shied away from controversy. He, at one point in the speech, said that the major issues and debates of the day are not for you. Yours is the profession of arms, the defense of the republic. So I thought he rose up to the point that we thought he was going to talk about thatâ€”and then he said, no, thatâ€™s not your business. No personal references whatsoever to his situation, that historical incident, or to any civilian Commander in Chief. It was directed clearly at cadets about to be commissioned. But not just our class. It was clearly directed at every subsequent class at the Academy. [crosstalk]

Learning to Grasp a New Kind of War
Interviewer

Kennedy speech. Tell me about Kennedyâ€™s speech.

Snider

Well, the Kennedy speech is much less clear in my mind. Mainly because MacArthur came in the middle of the week and cadet activities kind of stopped, and you could focus. Kennedyâ€™s speech came in the middle of June week, which is a hubbub of guests and

appearance and activities. So by the time you get to the graduation speech youâ€™re exhausted and most of it kind of goes over your head.

Don Snider

But what I do remember of it was that he was very careful to point out to us, and very successful in pointing out to us, that youâ€™re going to serve in a different time and youâ€™re going to serve in a different kind of war than the nation has been used to up to this point. So he talked about [insurgency in] Latin America. He talked a little bit about Special Forces. He talked a little bit about different kinds of wars than what we had studied. And that we were going to be prepared to be used in those. But beyond that, I remember very little.

Don Snider

Fortunately, I did get my diploma from him because I was a distinguished cadet that year, in the top 5%. Normally, the President gives diplomas to the first 30 or so in the class and then the Superintendent or the Dean present the rest of them. So I remember a personal aura.

Don Snider

I remember comments about the changing nature of service compared to previous generations. And, of course, we know now, later I knew, that this was an immense issue for Kennedy because he was having great difficulty getting the Armed Services to think out of anything other than World War II and Korea [the Korean War]. And, in fact, they werenâ€™t thinking about anything. They were very much locked into a mindset that did not want to countenance what he could see coming.

Interviewer

And what he saw coming was a different kind of war and a different kind of world really. Is that right?

Snider

Yes.

Interviewer

How would you describe those?

Snider

Well, we had a superpower role but it was clearly not the kind of role that we had used in rebuilding Europe. And thatâ€™s what he was talking about. The competition between the United States and the Soviet Union was now going to the periphery. We had spent the last few years focusing on rebuilding Europe, the Marshall Plan, occupational forces, etc.

Don Snider

And then Korea [the Korean War] was a war on periphery. But now he saw in the insurgencies in Latin America and in Southeast Asia more wars on the periphery. That was the principle issue. And he was asserting that the United States needed to lead in confronting communist or communist proxy-type insurgencies on the periphery of that large superpower confrontation.

Interviewer

This kind of counterinsurgency form of warfare was new to American foreign policy at the time. Was it taught at all at West Point?

Snider

No. We had practically none of it to my recollection. We may have had in military science a few lessons on the Armyâ€™s role in the insurgency in the Philippines. And that would have been about, to my recollectionâ€”and Iâ€™m not sure if I got that in DMI or I got that in one of the military art courses. But there was only the slightest bit of academic preparation in that.

Interviewer

Now Algeria [the Algerian War] had just happened, right, a few years before. Am I right, â€™50 something?

Snider

No, it was â€™58. Algeria [the Algerian War] had just happened, but Algeria [the Algerian War] was considered, at least to my way of thinking at that time, Algeria [the Algerian War] was considered as a French problem. And it was French were allies and French were dealing with it. And, yes, there were a lot of contretemps about whoâ€™s going to stay in NATO and who isnâ€™t. Butâ€”

Interviewer

But the form of warfare?

Snider

But the form of warfare was not focused on. It was a French problem. We didnâ€™t, until after the war was over and French authors started writing about that war, did, to my recollection, did myself and my peers begin to understand that, hey, there was a different form of war. And now people are beginning to document that, take it apart, look at it, talk about it.

Interviewer

What about [the] Vietnam [War]? What did you know about [the] Vietnam [War] as a Firstie?

Snider

Nothing. I mean, frankly, it was off the radar scope. Now remember, the academic curriculum at the Academy at the time that I was there did not allow electives. We were the first class to take one elective. And I took an elective from Joe Jordan, the head of our department, the Social Sciences Department. I took an elective on South Asia, India, Pakistan, and the emergence of Bangladesh, and the politics of post-colonial South Asia. So I frankly knew practically nothing about Vietnam and had done no professional reading on it until after I graduated.

Interviewer

So Dien Bien Phu was not something you had thought of?

Snider

It was in the news. It was a news item, not a scholarly item.

Interviewer

And who was superintendent when you were there?

Snider

Westmoreland, for part of the time that I was there. Gar Davidson my plebe year. World War II hero, World War II experience. Westmoreland the last two or three years I was there.

Don Snider

Again, World War II and Korea [the Korean War] experience. So a very conventional militaryâ€”all the military training we did at Buckner, everything was geared to the basic combat arms branches of the Armyâ€” Infantry, Armor, Artillery. It was even new that they were introducing [the] Aviation [Branch] as a major branch with helicopters.

Interviewer

Would you take this as a critique then of the training there, that you were being taught to fight the last war, that very familiarâ€”

Snider

Oh, I think thatâ€™s true. I think thatâ€™s absolutely true. As a critique, yes, more as a statement of fact. To say that this is a critique, I think you would have to say that the people leading the Academy in the academic departments then knew and accepted that there was major change coming and had simply not adapted it. I frankly donâ€™t think they knew. I donâ€™t think that in that sense it is that form of critique. I think it is more a descriptive state of fact of the mindset, the institutional mindset, that the four years that we went through it from â€™58 to â€™62.

Interviewer

But clearly there were people, I mean, Kennedy was a spokesman for them in some respects, who were seeingâ€”

Snider

Oh, yes. There were some. There were some. But there were not many in the military. Even when I studied this a bit later, there were not that many in the military that were really listened to.

Interviewer

What about Taylor? Did Taylor know anything about this? Was he advising Kennedy at the time?

Snider

Yeah. He brought him back out of retirement, made him the chairman. And he had just written The Uncertain Trumpet.

Don Snider

And there were ideas about what does the role of the superpower mean now that the war is moving to the periphery. How much do you rely on nuclear deterrence? How much are you going to rely on fighting wars under the nuclear umbrella? And what is the nature of those wars going to be? But to say that the leaders of the Academy while I was there had any institutional mindset towards that future nature of warfare, I think, would simply be inaccurate. I just didnâ€™t see any of that in our preparations. Let me tell you another reason Iâ€™m more confident of thatâ€”is when we got out, and I was going through my Basic Training in Ranger School, the failed Cuban invasion occurred.

Don Snider

And I remember as a Ranger company on patrol, we were brought into a camp one night and held out of our training regime, and said we may be coming and picking you up and you may be going up to Fort Bragg, and from there we donâ€™t know where.

Don Snider

Because a lot of contingency planning was occurring very quickly as that thing was unraveling. And then in 24 to 48 hours they said, nope, go back to training. And so we went back to doing what Ranger candidates do. But I remember being utterly shocked at that point, that wow, we can be thrown into combat, and itâ€™s going to be combat in Cuba and in Latin America and in places that I have thought not a wit about.

Interviewer

But now that had been planned under the Eisenhower administration, right?

Snider

But handed to Kennedy for execution.

Interviewer

But someone in the, I guess it was mostly CIA, was looking at this. No one in the other branches was reallyâ€”

Snider

Thatâ€™s my understanding of the history, that this was a very closely held and notâ€”

Interviewer

Iâ€™m going to stop you for oneâ€”

Enough of This War for All of Us
Interviewer

So, branch day, what did you choose?

Snider

I chose infantry, and the reason I choose infantry is because then, as now, cadets have the opportunity to go out in the Army for some period of time in either their sophomore or junior summer and try something. And as someone of high academic standing it was kind of expected I would go in the engineers. So I went out and tried being an engineer. Iâ€™ll

never forget, the 326 Engineer Battalion, Fort Campbell, Kentucky. And, unfortunately, the 326 Engineer Battalion, for the month I was there, was tearing down World War II barracks on the installation of Fort Campbell and salvaging the lumber.

Don Snider

And I did that forâ€"I did get a field exercise in for about a week and then we came back and spentâ€"and I said if this is what combat engineers do, then why not just be in the Infantry. So I came back from that experience and went to the Department of Military Instruction and moved my name from the possible Engineer List to the possible Infantry List and just stayed there for the rest of the time I was at the Academy. I was also taken, by then, they called it the Department of Military Psychology and Leadership. And I was taken by the psychology course and the challenge of interpersonal leadership relations.

Don Snider

I was fascinated by the fact that leadership is so intensely interpersonal and persuasive as opposed to command-directed. Even though the theories of leadership then were very much back in the transactional mode, if you listened carefully in the psychology courses, you understood that that really wasnâ€™t the way to lead anyway. You were going to have to be persuasive, etc., etc. So I was kind of challenged by the desire to want to lead other people. And Infantry offered that in spades. And so that was the second reason to me that, yeah, I can do this Infantry stuff. Plus, being raised on a farm, small, agile, didnâ€™t mind the rain. I mean, I could do all the outdoor stuff, and it was all fun.

Interviewer

Hold on for a second and talk about the leadership idea, because thatâ€™s kind of interesting to me. So you came to believe very quickly then that leadership was not necessarily by command, as you said, and maybe not by example, but by verbal persuasion?

Snider

Well, by example, yes. No, donâ€™t take example out. By persuasion, I mean that there is a purpose, and youâ€™ve got to take a disparate group of people and get them to cohere in a way that they all can focus on the purpose and not focus on themselves. And in the Infantry, youâ€™re doing that as much with the physical elements as you are with the intellectual content of what youâ€™re trying to get people to do.

Don Snider

Very early in my career, in Okinawaâ€"I went initially to Okinawa because I wasnâ€™t getting married, I didnâ€™t have a serious relationship, and I wanted an overseas, Airborne assignment so I got that extra $100 a month. There were only two: Vicenza, Italy, and Okinawa. So, since I was high standing, I basically got what I asked for. So I went to Okinawa. And after being a platoon leader and doing this for about nine months in the Philippines, in Thailand, in SEATO exercisesâ€"the nice thing about Okinawa is you just got your platoon and there were as many exercises to go to that you could go to.

Don Snider

And then I became an aide to a brigadier who was coming in to command this Airborne unit on Okinawa. A remarkable man, Ellis Williamson. Had entered World War II out of the North Carolina National Guard. Initial combat crossing the Channel. Rose from lieutenant

to full colonel, and at the end of the war, accepted the surrender of the German corps in three divisions as a breveted colonel. Five Silver Stars. Six Purple Hearts. Intense, intense small unit leadership throughout the war. And he had just some amazing insights. And we had a lot of discussions. I still have, to this day, a book of sayings that I would go home and write. But they wereâ€”

Interviewer

That came out of his mouth?

Snider

Out of his mouth. And most of them had to do with small unit tactics or small unit leadership.

Interviewer

Do you remember any of them now?

Snider

Oh, yeah. You block with bodies or do you block with bullets. He was talking about road blocks, whatâ€™s the best way to do it. Well, you can block with bullets and somebody can still run through it. If you block with bodies and support with bullets, you have a better chance of stopping. I mean, little things that he had learned working across Europe.

Don Snider

But some of the things that he would say, I foundâ€”like, â€œDon, remember, every day is not a good day in the life of a solider. How are you going to let them have bad days?â€ Just that kind of conversation. Where Iâ€™d come out of a very martial environment at the Academy that said, â€œHere are the standards, everybody meets the standards, what do you mean you donâ€™t meet the standards,â€ etc., etc. So since I did not have military background experience as an enlisted person, frankly, by the time Iâ€™d left the Academy, and even through my first commandâ€”troop leadingâ€”experiences in Okinawa, I always felt that part of my professional education was missing.

Don Snider

Fortunately, after I went out of the Airborne, into Special Forces, into [the] Vietnam [War], I was sent back to a Basic Training unit and I finally got to learnâ€”how do we take a civilian and make them a solider. That filled the last kind of hole in my curiosity, my understanding about whatâ€™s this humanness of the military all about. What is leadership all about?

Don Snider

But, prior to that, General Williamson was just remarkably helpful. I was having, and had, a lot of troop leading experience, and he kind of helped me reflect on that and process it for the six months that I was his aide. And then I went to him and said, thereâ€™s a war going on down there. And you guys are sitting here on Okinawa, and Special Forces is going back and forth every six months. If youâ€™ll rotate me over there for one of their lieutenantsâ€”which we were doing rather frequentlyâ€”I can get to the war quicker.

Interviewer

Youâ€™re talking about [the] Vietnam [War] now?

Snider

Yeah. Iâ€™ll never forget the story he told me. He said, Iâ€™ll tell you a story and then Iâ€™ll let you go. When he was waiting to cross the Channel, all American units were given British NCOs or officers as advisors in their training. And he happened to have a British NCO who had fought through two years on the continent and been evacuated at Dunkirk and now was advising. Pretty severely wounded, in the way General Williamson described him.

Don Snider

And Williamson kept bugging him as a young officer: â€œHow soon are we going to go? Whenâ€™s this landing going to be?â€ And the sergeant major kept telling him, â€œLieutenant, thereâ€™s enough war there for all of us. Youâ€™ll have your fill of it.â€ And then he would go on developing them. And thatâ€™s the same thing Williamson told me. He said, â€œThereâ€™s going to be enough of this war for all of us. It isnâ€™t going to be a quick war. But if you must be there early, if you must go, then go now. Iâ€™ll trade you with the next group of lieutenants being traded.â€

On the Ground in Vietnam
Don Snider

I went to Special Forces. People who had already been to [the] Vietnam [War], coming out of Special Forces, but needed still regular troop command time in a TO&E American unit. Thatâ€™s what this exchange was all about. Donâ€™t let your junior officers get only prepared for counterinsurgency. We still have to keep them equipped for conventional war. So I went to Special Forces and got an amazing education in 90 days before the team deployed. My team sergeant had done six combat tours in Laos. This was Sergeant Zacky. This was his seventh six-month tour.

Interviewer

Where was this Special Forces training that you did?

Snider

On Okinawa. That was the other thing. The first group did their own training there. They could go through the Q school of qualification and grant the prefix 3. So I joined a team of immensely experienced people. Trained in the northern part of the island, went down for an exercise in another island, Iriomote. And then went to [the] Vietnam [War] and did, in Special Forces, some of the craziest things that I everâ€”neverâ€”anticipated I would do. I was in a team that was selected to work with the Agency.

Don Snider

And so we did trail watching up in the tri-border region. To get into a trail watchers position, a three-man teamâ€”excuse meâ€”four-man team. Two Vietnamese, two Americans. The Vietnamese were Nungs, Chinese Vietnamese who had been selected for their stamina, as opposed to the low-land Vietnamese who were much smaller and much more finely boned.

Don Snider

And we would wear smoke jumpersâ€™ outfits and jump from about 600 to 700 feet with no reserve trying to find the thickest canopy you could find so that you could hang up in the

trees. And then you would carry 200 feet of rope in your leg pocket. Youâ€™d tie off your chute once it caught in the trees. And youâ€™d repel down and then release and bury everything and pick up your compass. It was amazingly amateurish because of the equipment that we had to use. Franklyâ€”

Interviewer

You were looking for trails?

Snider

Trails leading out of Laos into Vietnam

Interviewer

Gathering intelligence.

Snider

Gathering intelligence.

Interviewer

So that we would know just how much of a force we were facing.

Snider

And how fast it was coming through. But the difficulty was that you basically spent most of your time dealing with the elements and with survival. If you got to a trail watching site and were able to stay there undetected for a while, yes, you could report some intelligence. But I donâ€™t recollect that more than one occasion we were ever very successful at that.

Interviewer

So youâ€™d drop down and then youâ€™d go find a site where you could see the Trail. And then youâ€™d just eyeball it?

Snider

Just eyeball it. Trying to stay alive. We could stay there four to five days to a week. Measure flow for a period. And, of course, we didnâ€™t have communications equipment.

Interviewer

How were you recording this? Just on paper, I guess.

Snider

Yeah. Sure.

Interviewer

Stick it in your pocket and then waiting to getâ€”

Snider

And then evacuating back into a Special Forces camp.

Don Snider

Thatâ€™s a three- to four- to five-day process, getting out of the tri-border area and getting up the Dak To or one of the Special Forces camps that was positioned. And then in many cases, by then batteries were dead. No radio communication. In many cases, it was hazardous getting into the Special Forces camp as it was working up on the border. Because the Rhade and the tribes working for the Special Forces up there were just as liable to shoot any bush that moved, soâ€¦ But it wasâ€”

Interviewer

Was there enemy onto you as well or not?

Snider

Oh, yeah. I remember one trip. Once they had spotted you and felt that there was a team in their area, then they would track them, us. And I can remember one trip moving for three days, and they would signal to each othersâ€™ tracking teams by firing rifles. Two shots. Three shots. They had their own little signals of what it meant. And I can remember on one particular trip, we went three days knowing that they knew something about us and they were tracking us. And we were moving as fast as we could move. And eventually the shots got further and further away. And eventually there were no more. Soâ€”

Interviewer

You were the hunted.

Snider

Yeah. Oh, yeah. At that point we were the hunted. But anyway, I did, at that point in my career, some things that taught me the other side of this whole spectrum of, wow, what is this kind of war really like? What is it about? And then I went back to [the] Vietnam [War] twice more in conventional assignments with our 1st Cav. So I gotâ€”

Interviewer

You went there with Special Forces. Thatâ€™s all we had in [the] Vietnam [War] was Special Forces. Am I right?

Snider

Thatâ€™s right. We were not thenâ€”this is 1964. We had a MAAG group. And the MAAG group had some advisors with Vietnamese units. So we did have a small, as I recall, Military Assistance Advisory Group. But Iâ€™ll tell you, we didnâ€™t see any of that. We were in a isolated camp up on the coast. We did our training there. The Vietnamese Special Forces provided sanitized aircraft for us to do these missions in.

Don Snider

Plausible deniability so that the Americans had noâ€”these were, when I say a sanitized aircraft, Iâ€™m talking about Taiwanese C-46s left over from the Second World War. Nothing but one gyrocompass for the pilot to azimuth from our seacoast base toâ€”and azimuth in distance. And thatâ€™s when the red light came on. So there were times that we went out and we werenâ€™t with 5 to 7 to 10 miles of where we were supposed to be. But fortunately, the Ho Chi Minh Trail was a network of trails that goes a long distance. So if they got us up there in the vicinity, or even way out in it, you could do something.

Interviewer

Were you armed?

Snider

Oh, yes.

Interviewer

With what?

Snider

Well, all of us were given smallâ€”lâ€™m thinking first of the secondary arm. All of us were given Belgium Browning .25 caliber boot pistols that we could hide. So you had a preservation weapon. But you picked the weapon that you wanted. You could have an AR-15. They didnâ€™t work well in sand and humidity.

Don Snider

I was armed with a carbine left over from World War I and World War II because I had a folding stock for it and it was short. And in this kind of work youâ€™re not planning on getting in a big fight. You need to be agile and you need to be able to move. So I did most of my trips with a carbine.

Interviewer

What were your terms of engagement? I mean, would you have fired on enemy if you saw them or not?

Snider

Oh, yeah. There were not rules of engagement in that war. You basically engaged only as needed to preserve your mission and survival. We were not there to fight. This is intelligence. So we sought not to engage ever. Because the minute you did, you had to break of the mission, and just, then you were high tailing it for three or four days at a time.

Interviewer

So youâ€™re there. You have World War II training, essentially, here, at West Point. Youâ€™ve gone to Okinawa. Youâ€™ve had a thirst to get into the war, which was curiosity in part, I guess?

Snider

Very much so.

Interviewer

Thrill, too? A young manâ€™s thrill?

Snider

Yeah, I think it was thrill, timing. Thereâ€™s an immense competitiveness at that age. I did not want to see my peers going to the war that I wasnâ€™t going to. The people that we

were being swapped out of Special Forces, I knew a few of them.

Don Snider

They were at least two classes ahead of me. Some guys in the glee club. Some guys in my company, even. So here were people I had known at the Academy in cadet days, and theyâ€™d already been to combat and I hadnâ€™t. And so that was a motive. But I think curiosity wasâ€”I didnâ€™t want to go out to the Pacific, do my first tour, and come back to the States, or wherever else they were going to send me, and not have been to [the] Vietnam [War]. During the six months that I was in the Airborne before I went to Special Forcesâ€”and I did 6, 9, 12, I donâ€™t know, almost a full year, I guess.

Don Snider

As I said, I took my Airborne platoon on several SEATO exercises. And these were with British forces and Australian forces. I did a big exercise in Thailand around Lopburi, which was the Thai jungle warfare school. We did exercises down in Iriomote, where we adopted techniques that were taught in the Malaysian jungle school, which a few of our officers were able to go to. I was notâ€”I never got a slot to go to the Malaysian jungle school.

Don Snider

So during the time I was in the Airborne unit I had been learning how the Aussies and the Brits and the Thais and that Taiwaneseâ€”I did two or three jumps on Taiwan working with their Airborne regimen, which had some counterinsurgency, not much but some in it. So I had been thinking about and had been listening to otherâ€”and of course everything that came out of the Brits and the Aussies was out of their war in Malaysia and what they had incorporated out of that into their jungle school. So I was not devoid of understanding of jungle warfare, irregular warfare, how to live in the jungle, etc.

Interviewer

But you say you felt amateurish, ill-equipped, not ready to do what you did and wanted to go back and learn more.

Snider

Yeah. The thing that throughout the whole period in Okinawa, even after I had been to [the] Vietnam [War] and came back, the thing that I still felt that I was deficient in as an officer is, I did not know how we took citizens and made them soldiers. I always felt that I would have been so much better prepared, not only for the cadet experience, but for the first few years afterwards, if I had had some military experience before. I couldnâ€™t change circumstances.

Interviewer

Leading men, essentially?

Snider

Yeah, it was just always in the back of my mind

Interviewer

But you werenâ€™t leading, as a member of Special Forces, you werenâ€™t leading any men during that time?

Snider

Yes.

Interviewer

You were.

Snider

It was a 12-man team. So I was theâ€”in the Special Forces structure, this was an A team. There is a captain and a lieutenant. So I was the deputy commander of the team. And what you normally do, the other ten members are in pairs of two. Weapons specialist, communication specialist, medical specialist, civil affairs specialist. So you can divide the team easily into two six-man components. And in doing the trail watching mission, thatâ€™s what we did. So fundamentally, I was leading a six-man team all the time we were in [the] Vietnam [War].

Interviewer

And what is a civil affairs specialist in those circumstances?

Snider

Well, I used the word â€œcivil affairs,â€ but basically they are the people who are more language-trained than the others and more culturally aware than the others. And theyâ€™re basically there to help with relationships and understanding and working with the indigenous.

Interviewer

So you finish your first tour in [the] Vietnam [War] with Special Forces. You go back to Okinawa. Is that right?

Snider

Go back to Okinawa for a short period.

Reflections on Basic Training and Leadership
Don Snider

And then was sent, as I said, McNamara was in starting Project 100,000. I donâ€™t know if you are familiar with that. 100,000 was where the Army was going to, as it expanded, take some Category IV soldiers. And they picked Fort Leonard Wood as one of the bases of Basic Training at which to implement the program. The Army was told to select people to do that. So I was sent. I thought I was going back to Bragg, to the 82nd Airborne. And my orders were changed, and I was sent to Fort Leonard Wood.

Don Snider

Infantry Range told me, â€œBecause youâ€™ve already been in combat and you know what we need on the output side, you know what these folks have got to do, so we need you going to Basic Training. And besides, itâ€™s a command, youâ€™ll getâ€”â€ So for one yearâ€”

Interviewer

This is â€™64 still?

Snider

â€™64.

Interviewer

And so weâ€™re ramping up?

Snider

Weâ€™re ramping up. Weâ€™re starting toâ€” So for one year to the day, I remember, 11 April, â€™64 to 11 April, â€™65, I was commanding a Basic Training company in Fort Leonard Wood. But Department of Defense later decided not to use Leonard Wood. So the Project 100,000 troops never came to us. I was just doing regular Army Basic Training. And learning the transition from citizenâ€”think, weâ€™re lamentable that a fourth of the eligible population today is so obese that they canâ€™t serve in the military.

Don Snider

Well, there was still some percentage then. Because I remember that one of the greatest frustrations I had were people who came into the Army and immediately were well behind because they were so unfit. And because we had, frankly, such a poorly-designed system of conditioning them. Weâ€™re much smarter about it now. But in those days, you put them in combat boots right away, which created blisters, broke arches. They took long marches. There was not the kind of ramping that there should have been in the pre-commissioning preparation that we do now.

Interviewer

So you say you learned there how to take a citizen and turn him into a soldier?

Snider

Yeah, I did. And I learned, I think, a great deal of empathy for thoseâ€”This was the first place I had seen peopleâ€”Iâ€™m putting it in context of words that I know now that I did not know thenâ€”but I know what the feeling was. It is the first time in my life since I had been in grade school that I was responsible for dealing with people who had been failures. And my challenge was to make them a success.

Don Snider

Thatâ€™s the interpersonal aspect of leadership that I mentioned earlier that Iâ€™ve always been kind of struck with. What a marvelous opportunity and yet what a absolutely vexing problem, to take someone who does not know successâ€”not in all cases, but I guess I tended to focus on those that were in this category. But to take those who have not known success, and have only known failure, and to make them successful people. Thatâ€™s not easy. And maybe thatâ€™s just my own unique way of looking at it. But I had a very sensitive black first sergeant then who, very much like General Williamson, was quiet. Sergeant Luther.

Don Snider

But when he spoke, you ought to listen, because he could see in people and in trainees

things that I couldnâ€™t see. Now not the drill sergeants. They were in your face, moving all the time. This pack is not right. They made things happen. But the first sergeants and I got to step back from the platoons that were in training and say, â€œSee that guy? Why isnâ€™t he doing better? Why is this man over here in this platoon of the sick, lame, and lazy, who canâ€™t do PT now because theyâ€™re recovering from something?â€ And I think that I learned empathy in ways that I had not known it in my life. And I think that makes you ultimately a better leader.

Interviewer

Iâ€™m curious. This empathy, how does that inform your leadership? In other words, understanding what the issue may be with someone, how do you turn them from a failure into a success?

Snider

Wellâ€”you canâ€™t lead somebody you donâ€™t understandâ€”

Don Snider

And there was, I thought after I had been in Basic Training, when I had later commanded a battalion at Fort Ord, an infantry battalion, I had much more confidence and understanding of junior enlisted NCOs, how they thought differently from each other. Senior NCOs, junior officers. I mean, you can take a battalion and break down the rank hierarchy into at least five different groups that need to be approached almost in five different ways. And you needed to communicate with them in different forms and with different messages.

Don Snider

While at the same time I have seen some overarching and integrating themes that everybody agrees to. And I donâ€™t think that I could have done that as a battalion commander later had I not had that Basic Training experience, the earlier Special Forces experienceâ€”which taught me so much about senior NCOs. And then, later, I had two combat tours in the 1st Cav whereâ€”thatâ€™s where I learned unit combat, how we fight and integrate as units.

Interviewer

And you were training enlisted men and men who had been conscripted as well?

Snider

Where, at Fort Ord in the battalion command?

Interviewer

No, Leonard Wood.

Snider

Leonard Wood. Yes. These were allâ€”I was a Basic Training company, so I was training only people who had come in through the recruiting stations.

Interviewer

And you read Huntington already?

Snider

Oh, yes. Yeah. Iâ€™d studied Huntington, Janowitz. We did have a good preparation at the Academy.

Interviewer

So you could put these in a theoretical construct as well as the real practicalâ€”

Snider

I could but frankly I donâ€™t think I did that much. I think I was much more in the here and now. Only later, even much later, when I started researching and writing in the field, did I draw on this in that sense.

Mountain Combat in Vietnam
Interviewer

So you go back to [the] Vietnam [War]. Tell me about those tours. You had two more tours, you said?

Snider

Yeah. Yeah. â€™65 I finished the command. I went back to [the] Vietnam [War], was thereâ€”no, wait a minute. I went to the basic course in between. I forget whether I went to the basic course before or after. But thereâ€™s one year in there to go to the company command course at Fort Benning. But I went back to [the] Vietnam [War] in â€™66 and â€™67. And I was among the first officers to go into the 1st Cav as it was fulfilling its first year.

Don Snider

So I was going into an American unit which had fought Ia Drang and the other major battles of its first year. And yet these very experienced people who had gone through the 11 assault division field trials at Benning for two years and then into [the] Vietnam [War], my goodness. My battalion officers had been together for three years, the last of which was in combat. And I was one of the first captains to come in. And I went to the S-3 shop as an assistant-3 to learn how air mobile operations are done before I became a company commander. That was the normal routine. And that tour was S-3 and a battalionâ€“ company commander for seven months and then brigade assistant S-3.

Don Snider

And I worked for some remarkable people. Battalion Commander Shy Meyer, who was later the Chief of Staff of the Army. He was a lieutenant colonel just commanding the battalion. Remarkable. Subsequent battalion commanders were equally good and later successful in the Army, retiring at two and three stars. And then when I went up to be on the brigade staff, the brigade commander was George Casey, [Sr.], the father of the current Chief of Staff. And he was just finishing up his brigade command. And when I went back to the Cav the next timeâ€”

Interviewer

He was about to die in that accident then?

Snider

No, no. He was finishing up his tour as a brigade commander. This was â€™66, â€™67. Then I went to graduate school two years. I went back to [the] Vietnam [War] as a Major and all of these personalities reappeared in the Cav and me along with them. Now, Shy Meyer is the Chief of Staff of the division, Casey, [Sr.] is the two-star running the division, and Iâ€™m placed into a brigade that is commanded by my ex-battalion commander, Stevenson, who is now a brigade commander.

Don Snider

So here I am back in the 1st Cav, now as a brigade-3 for nine months. Working, essentially, in tier for the same three men Iâ€™d worked for before. I mean, it was remarkably comfortable and helpful. A lot of like-mindedness. A lot of inbred capability in the Cav as people came back for a second and third tour with those unique sets of capabilitiesâ€”the immense amount of aviation and aerial rocket artillery, and the ability to move quickly and to pile on quickly.

Interviewer

Did you see in all of them their skills growing, their understanding of that particular war and of that country? And, I guess, put that in some context of the political battles that were going on at the time over this war.

Snider

Well, the first answer I can say emphatically, yes. Becauseâ€”and this was probably unique to the 1st Cav more so than any other division. But by the second year the division was in-country, for anyone to qualify as a command of a brigade or one of the flag officers in the division, and then even later to command a battalionâ€”the Army had decided that those individuals had to be aviation-qualified.

Don Snider

So Shy Meyer went to flight school, late, as a colonel. Casey, [Sr.] did the same thing. Stevenson, I can remember my brigade commander, as we going out on operations in our command helicopter, Colonel Stevenson always flew with a rated instructor pilot. Because he was still certifying and recertifying this brigade commander in combat on his instrumentation capabilities as an individual pilotâ€”while I was in the back of the helicopter directing what was going on among the battalions and the air assaults and stuff. And so all of these gentlemen went through aâ€”every time they went backâ€” a new set of capabilities in the use of air assault forces in what were essentially counterinsurgency operations.

Don Snider

We didnâ€™t call them that. There was a lot of search and destroy. We didnâ€™tâ€”in the Cav, we didnâ€™t do that much. We basically, in the 1st Cav Division, operated with a wonderful aviation CAB regiment that allowed us to find main force unitsâ€”by main force, I mean infiltrated North Vietnamese Army unitsâ€”and then pile on around them and pound them, in what turned out to be rather conventional operations, once you got on the ground and you were simply fighting in the jungle against another force that had mortars and RPGs and battalion formations.

Don Snider

In fact, as I got my company command in 1966â€”like I said, I was an Assistant 3 waiting to

take a company. And in the Battle of Chu Pong Mountain, B Company was chewed up so badâ€”company commander was killed, platoon leader was killed, weapons platoon leader was wounded. I took command on the side of Chu Pong Mountain of a company of 25, 29 people and one wounded officer. That was all that was left of the company. They had been mortared for three days in a really intense mortar, counter-mortar aerial rocket artillery battle over the periphery of Chu Pong Mountain.

Interviewer

Now, you arrived to take over command fromâ€”

Snider

Yeah, the fact is, I was flown up on the mountain, rappelling in with three medics because they had so many wounded, and we got shot down. I never got there. The plane got shot up as we were just banking, and I had just jumped off the skid and was still holding the rappel. We were trying to repel in, and a 12-7 just stitched the bottom of the aircraft and shot out the hydraulics.

Don Snider

And I remember the door gunner screaming in Airborne, I mean, air mobile language, â€œDead stick, dead stick.â€ And what that meant is the pilot had no hydraulic controls anymore, and he was simply going to muscle the plane in whatever area he could get it to crash. And so thatâ€™s what he did. We got about a thousand yards away from the battle, fortunately, out of all the battle. Andâ€”

Interviewer

But you had already rappelled down.

Snider

What?

Interviewer

You had already rappelled down.

Snider

No. I didnâ€™t. I had just jumpedâ€”

Interviewer

You were in the aircraft then as it crashed.

Snider

I was climbing back in the aircraft in a mad scrambleâ€”all four of us wereâ€”and just got in the aircraft and tried to get down on the floor before it crashed, but we got thrown all around.

Interviewer

Did anyone survive?

Snider

Well, I did, and one pilot did, and two medics did.

Interviewer

How many did you lose then?

Snider

Three. But with a dead stick, he was able to do what good pilots in airmobile divisions know to do, is to try and crash your helicopter between two large trees or formations of trees so that you rip the main rotor off. And then the body of the aircraft just settles the last 50 to 100 feet.

Don Snider

But as youâ€™re going through the canopy, you donâ€™t want the rotor to stay with you, because most casualties in a case like this occur because the turbine is still churning the rotor, so once you hit the ground, the rotor is still hitting things and flopping the body around. So it can become horrible eggbeater on the ground when a helicopterâ€™s dying.

Interviewer

So you owe your life to this pilot.

Snider

Oh, yeah, without a doubt.

Interviewer

Where is he now?

Snider

Iâ€™m not in touch with him. Remember, one of the sad things about the way we operated in that war is that all officer assignments and re-assignments were by individuals. There were no units kept together ever. I went in as an individual. I took command as an individual. Someone replaced me as an individual. And so when he was leaving and went back to Benning, and I never was in touch with him again.

Interviewer

Do you know his name?

Snider

I know his name, but I didnâ€™t pursue it. Why didnâ€™t I? I donâ€™t know. I had difficulty enough pursuing people in my own company and trying to keep up with some of those. And I did, with the lieutenants and some of the NCOs for a number of years, but even over the years, some of those finally fritter away. Well, and people have died, I mean, weâ€™re getting older.

Don Snider

But, suffice it to say, yeah, there was an immense adaptation in the 1st Cav. I was

privileged to have the next two tours in a unit that had that kind of capabilities and was learning as much and retaining the knowledge in the division asâ€”and with the very remarkable people I served with, good people.

Interviewer

The commanding general at this point was Westmoreland, is that right?

Snider

Yes. Abrams was taking over. Abrams came in as the vice. And I was aware my second, my third tour, when I went back with Stevenson, this was â€™70 and â€™71. And by then, I was much more aware of what some of my classmates had been doing in the CORDS operation and what we were doing in our districts of supporting the efforts of placing regional forces in the field and trying to support population centers and dealing with populations, relocations, resettlement villages, the Chieu Hoi Program.

Don Snider

Evenâ€”because by my third tour, the mission of the Cav then had large elements in it of supporting the Vietnamese. We were then not working in an AOR up on the border against units coming through. We were now down in War Zone D and War Zone C. There was a core structure of Vietnamese forces. There were regulars and irregulars and regional. And the Cav had a responsibility of supporting all of these. And we were starting to draw down. By the end of my third tourâ€”

Interviewer

What year are we in now?

Snider

â€™71. By the end of my third tour, the 1st Cav went from a full division to one brigade. And that was the last duty I had in the division, because basically, I stood down our brigade. And once the flag was folded and Colonel Stevenson went home and I still had three more months on my tour, and someone, somewhere, had looked through my record and found out that I had a masterâ€™s degree in economics and one in political science, and I was going next to West Point to teach, and they said,

Don Snider

â€œWell, you got 90 days left in country. Youâ€™re coming to Saigon, and youâ€™re going to work on the MACV staffâ€â€”by then it was Abramsâ€™ staffâ€â€œin the Office of Economic Assistance.â€ And thatâ€™s the first time I got my eyes opened to how we support wars in foreign countries, because I was working with a little group of six professionals who were advising Abrams and his staff on how to generateâ€”legitimatelyâ€”generate funds for the Ministry of Defense so that they can pay for their army.

Don Snider

Exampleâ€”one of the initiatives that we worked was getting foreign firmsâ€”Korean, in particular, and Taiwanese, in particularâ€”to come into Vietnam, work with Vietnamese firms to police up tank holes and battlefield debris, equipment, metal, and ship it to the budding small unit iron industry that was just starting in Korea and Taiwan. This gave them supplies that they could run up the coast in barges andâ€” so here was a way that we

could take off the battlefield things that were not on our books and were legitimately debris from the war, and that this could be used.

Don Snider

And of course, by this time, there were a lot of legal arguments going on about, well, how can you support the [South] Vietnamese Army, because the Congress is saying, weâ€™re cutting this out and cutting this out and cutting this out? So we were back on the other side looking for legitimate, legal, but yet creative, waysâ€”because we knew if you canâ€™t pay an army, theyâ€™re not going to be on the battlefield. And certainly the Vietnamese government had great difficulty with having enough funds of its own.

Interviewer

Right.

Snider

So I did that for the last 90 days.

The Politics of the Vietnam War
Don Snider
Interviewer

Tell me what yourâ€“ There are many historical takes on the War in Vietnamâ€”the war was lost by the generals, the war was lost by the politicians, that we were winning the war when the support was pulled out. Thereâ€™s an Abrams-centric version of the war, right. Thereâ€™s a Westmoreland-centric version of the war. As someone who went through three deployments to [the] Vietnam [War] and also an historian of some noteâ€”what would you say is your version of the war?

Snider

Well, to tell you that, Iâ€™d have to tell you about the other two yearsâ€™ experience when I went to graduate school between those tours.

Interviewer

Letâ€™s do that, and then weâ€™ll.

Snider

I came back to the United States after my second tour as a company commander. The first time, Iâ€™d been in the 1st Cav. That was a 13-month tour. Went to the career course, and went to the University of Wisconsin in Madison to do a double degree program en route to going to West Point to teach. So I was at Madison â€™68â€“â€™69 to â€™71.

Interviewer

When Madison was exploding, right?

Snider

It was exploding.

Interviewer

Yeah.

Snider

I mean, I lived there through the Black Power riots one year and theâ€”that was the second year. The first year was the Cambodian invasion riots. And so here I was. Iâ€™d been in Benning a year, after all of this time overseas, in the South, where there was not too much agitation about the war. And I went to Madison, Wisconsin, and all of a sudden, not only in the department I was in, where students were literally starving themselves to avoid the draft. I mean, I had two students in school who starved themselves to get their weight down so low that they were declared medically ineligible for the draft.

Don Snider

And I am convinced that a couple of them probably impaired their health doing it. I really am. I was amazed at the resolve, the bitterness, that my peers in contemporary America felt about the military, the war, and the draft. I was absolutely unprepared for what I encountered. And because it was known rather quickly that I had been in Special Forces and Iâ€™d been in the war, I also became the object at Wisconsin ofâ€”the Weathermen tried to recruit me and some other people, because they said, well, you know how to make bombs. And these guys were basically anarchists.

Don Snider

They said, â€œWell, you know how to blow up things, and weâ€™re going to bomb the Baraboo Army Ammunition Plant.â€ So I immediately went home and told my wife and some other officers I was going to school with, â€œIâ€™ve got to get in touch with the FBI. This isâ€”this is off the reservationâ€â€”and it was. And they did try and bomb the plant. And these were the same guys who had contacted me and I had called in the ROTC detachment while I was there. Three rounds fired through the front window of the home of the Air Force colonel. I mean, this was very violent.

Don Snider

And so, during that two-year period, my understanding of the political standing of the war radically changed. As an officer up to that point, I had been convinced that we were doing as best we could. And in fact, when I had left [the] Vietnam [War] in â€™67, we were doing well. Main force units were coming down the Trail, and they were getting chewed up and sent back. And so I was convinced that this was a doable proposition.

Don Snider

But when I got backâ€”went through the basic course, then spent two years in Madison. And Iâ€™d listened to CBS, Iâ€™d listened to Cronkite, Iâ€™d listened to the commentary on the military. I saw how I was treated on a campusâ€”now, not everybody in the campus. I mean, the campus was a battleground of its own. The Agriculture Department and some folks in the physical sciences would rumble everyday against the noontime demonstration out on the common square. And so the campus police would have to come in and break that up everyday. But it was a battleground.

Interviewer

But were you targeted?

Snider

I was targeted only as a subject matter expert. Now, did I have some people cast aspersion and yell and scream and spit and do all of that stuff? Yeah, but I stayed away from them. Once you found out what your status was, you stayed away from that stuff. And the people that I studied with in the departments, we established a degree of respect for each other. They didnâ€™t support the war, they were starving themselves, not going. They knew I had been there, they knew I had been wounded. They were willing to say, letâ€™s donâ€™t talk about this. It basically was we had agreed to disagree.

Interviewer

The wounding we didnâ€™t get to, that was in the plane crash?

Snider

Yeah.

Interviewer

Oh, okay.

Snider

But in my own understanding of the war, I went back for the third tour with a really heavy heart. I went back for the third tour wondering if we were accomplishing anything after what I had seen here. And I went back convinced in my mind that that war was not salvageable in the public eye.

Don Snider

And from what I knew of civil-military and what Iâ€™d just studied of political science, public administration, policy makingâ€”what I had studied up to this point says democracies donâ€™t successfully fight wars if their people will not support. I really went back not admitting it to myself but feeling in my heart that the war had been lost. And then when I got back, I will never forget, as I was processing into the Cav the last time, another colonel was leaving that I really respected, because he commanded the battalion right next to the 2nd or the 5th Cav, Fred Karhos. And I remember as I was processing in, I was in the Officersâ€™ Club one night down at Bien Hoa where all the officers went through, before you went out to your unit.

Don Snider

And I had a beer with Karhos, and he was saying, â€œWell, Don, I wonâ€™t be back here.â€ And this was a guy I had always looked up to and really esteemed. I said, â€œWhat do you mean?â€ He said, â€œIâ€™m not putting any more time in this war. Itâ€™s going nowhere.â€ Now, he was leaving from a year, and I hadnâ€™t been there for two years. But he says, â€œItâ€™s just not worthâ€â€”and then he got into the personal issueâ€”â€œand my wife canâ€™t stand it anymore, and Iâ€™ve done two full tours, and I will not be back here again. Iâ€™ll be out of the Army first.â€

Don Snider

And so Iâ€”I had been out on a campus. I hadnâ€™t been around many Army officers, except those that were in grad school with me, five or six. Now I come back into the mainstream of Army officers, and Iâ€™m listening to people that I respect as Iâ€™m processing in, and theyâ€™re fed up. Now these were people coming out of conventional units, not people that had been working in CORDS or working in some of the pacification

programs.

Don Snider

Soâ€”and then when I got in the brigade and found out what we were doingâ€” I joined my brigade as it was coming out of Cambodia [the Cambodian incursions], the second foray into Cambodia. And as we were given the mission to start supporting the Vietnameseâ€”we were starting the turnover to the ARVN. So we went internally to the war zones, different mission, different approach. And I think for most of my last tour in [the] Vietnam [War], I simply was committed to tidying things up as best we could. But I had no illusions in my mind that there was an outcome that anybody could predict with certainty. And that was a sick feeling.

Don Snider

Iâ€™d left aâ€”by then I was married, had a wife and one daughter, and my wife was pregnant with the otherâ€”the secondâ€”because we thought we were going straight from grad school to West Point. It was only four months before I was supposed to go to West Point that I got phone call saying, â€œOur personnel managementâ€™s all screwed up. We got too many officers in the department. We canâ€™t take you for a year. Weâ€™re giving you back to Infantry for a year.â€ To which my response was, â€œAnd where do you think theyâ€™re going to send me?â€ They said, â€œYeah, youâ€™re going back to [the] Vietnam [War].â€ So thatâ€™s how it worked out.

Interviewer

The drugs, the race issues, all that, did you see that when you went back to [the] Vietnam [War] for that third tour?

Snider

Yeah, the third time I went back. The second time, I had already had one very disquietingâ€”the second time I was there, even by â€™67, I was learning then that the senior non-commissioned officers wouldâ€” who were eligible for retirementâ€”were going to retire before they came back for a second tour. The arduousness of being in the Cav constantly out in the jungle for a 12-month tourâ€”the E-6s, E-7s and E-8s, there were very good men there who were setting their jaw and saying, â€œIâ€™ve done one of these tours, but I canâ€™t do more than that.â€

Don Snider

So when I went back for my third tour, the first thingâ€”besides this experience of learning that senior military officers were disillusionedâ€” when I got into Cav, thatâ€™s when I experienced what we called â€œShake â€˜Nâ€™ Bakeâ€ NCOs. Because by â€™70 and â€™71, the Army had run out of NCOs. We didnâ€™t have an NCO Corps. So we were taking NCOs out of Basic Training eight weeks, AIT eight weeks, go to NCO training for four weeks, and we put E-6 stripes on you and send you, and youâ€™re a squad leader in combat.

Don Snider

The first two months, I was a brigade-3. I rememberâ€”clearlyâ€”incidents of when those squad leaders inadvertently killed their own soldiers because they set claymore mines as booby traps on patrols or on outpostsâ€”they put the mine in the dark backwards. And when they got spooked in the night by rain, sound, whatever, and thought they were being

penetrated and popped it, it blew inward as opposed to outward. I mean, I can remember just almost vomiting at the ineptness of what the Army had become.

Don Snider

Now, in the Cav, we had some fraggings. Fortunately, in our brigade, we didnâ€™t. Most of that occurred back at base camp, and of course, being in a forward brigade, I was never back at the base camp. But you knew about it. You knew about the fraggings. You could look at the quality of the NCO corps. You could look at the missions we were being given to support the ARVNâ€”at all the levels. You could talk to the senior NCO officers who were leaving disillusioned. And I had no doubts in my mind, in my last tour there, that itâ€™s not at all clear that this is going to be successful.

Don Snider

I could never bring myselfâ€”the ultimate question from Lincoln, â€œDid this soldier die in vain?â€ I never could bring myself, I donâ€™t think, to address that issue honestly while I was there, because I didnâ€™tâ€”I probably had some PTSD by the end of the third tour. And even after three years of teaching at West Point, when I went to Leavenworthâ€”fortunately, in my seminar at Leavenworth was the chief psychiatrist from Womack Hospital in Fort Bragg.

Don Snider

And when the 14 of us sat down the first day, he said, â€œGuys, youâ€™ve all been in combat. You all got your heads bent. Iâ€™m not stopping practicing while Iâ€™m here at Leavenworth. So if any of you want personal counseling, let me know. Off the record, off the books, in my home, we got a year. Donâ€™t waste it.â€

Don Snider

Well, it took me about a month and a lot of conversations with my wife to convince myself that I probably needed to do that, and it was a profound revelation of, yeah, I had some immense feelings of bitterness, anger, we lost the war, we didnâ€™t do it right, this was a wasteâ€”a real confusion of emotions that was very helpful in me sorting out my own thinking about myself and my participation in that war.

Don Snider

Now, all that jumble of emotions was not war-induced, as he showed me through that year. I had a lot of issues with my own father, since I was the youngest son, and I had left the farms, and he had spent his life creating a farm corporation, and my brother was now a nuclear physicist, and nobody else was going to do this, and yet I was staying in the Army andâ€”so I was dealing the mid-life issues that a lot of people do, but I also was dealing with three combat tours in an unsuccessful war effort, and a lot of personal equity in it.

Interviewer

Do you still tussle with these memories and whether the soldiers that you saw die died in vain?

Snider

Well, Iâ€™m never comfortable with it. I donâ€™t think you ever get comfortable with it. I mean, this is about loss thatâ€”as we study it in economic terms, is incommensurable. Itâ€™s the value of a life. You canâ€™t talk about those in any kinds of monetary terms.

But on the other hand, the more Iâ€™ve studied war, the more I understand that there is a character and a nature to war. There is the dark side to war that is not going to go away.

Don Snider

When you unleash the dogs of war, thatâ€™s what youâ€™re unleashing. That is going to exist. And if youâ€™re an officer in war, youâ€™re going to be a part of it. So how much do you beat yourself up? How much do you say you couldâ€™ve done this differently? How much do you say it was them and not us? I think the more that I have studied profession, the more I have written about it, the more I understand the limits of moral responsibility of officers, the beginnings of moral responsibility of civilian leaders. There is a gray area in between where both are morally responsible.

Don Snider

But I think Iâ€™ve learned and have written enough about itâ€”and hopefully, have now educated enough generations of other officers of how to think about this that, in the moral sense, you have to focus within your own domain, within your own responsibilities. Our form of government does not allow you to make decisions for other people. Theyâ€™re morally accountable for their own. But that certainly doesnâ€™t resolve you from your moral accountability, and Iâ€™d never seen a plan, a battle, an operation, a campaign that militarily is as sound as it couldâ€™ve been.

Don Snider

Thatâ€™s the nature of being a profession. Youâ€™re acting so discretionarily. Leadership and decision-making in the military is not science with formulas and calculus. Itâ€™s immensely discretionaryâ€”based on abstract knowledge that the person holds. So itâ€™s immensely moral in its content. And you have to learn what are the moral boundaries and how to deal with the results of moral failure, and thereâ€™s going be moral failure in war.

Interviewer

When your mind started to shift, and it had to do in part because in democracies, as you say, wars canâ€™t be won that donâ€™t have popular supportâ€”but did you feel that there was, how was it that the war lost support? Did it lose support because it wasnâ€™t explained or sold to the American people effectively? Did it lose support because it was wrong to begin with? Did it lose support because it was being fought poorly? Or all of the above?

Don Snider

Yeah, I think all of the above. Let me take the big rock in that rucksack. The big rock in that rucksack for most of my generation, and for myself initially, was what was the role of the media in undercutting public support for the war, and was that really what happened.

Don Snider

But I can remember being just incensed when I was at Benning in graduate school and watching CBS reporters commenting on the nightly news and showing a burning thatch roof of a village with the commentary, â€œTo save the village, the U.S. Army had to destroy itâ€â€”and tell myself how utterly wrong an interpretation of what is happening. I know whatâ€™s happening there. I know why theyâ€™re doing that. There is no truthfulness at all to this explanation of what visually I am observing. So I can remember having extremely visceral reactions to the role of the media.

Don Snider

On the other hand, when I went back to the war, I saw how we were treating the media and how inside the military our own ineptness and unwillingness to cross that line and create, again, empathy and working relationships for different responsibilities so that you get some coherent outcome. So part of it, my reaction of who lost the war, initially was very visceral, very focused on the media. The two years in graduate school were very helpful in that regard, because I got to watch and listen to a lot of media, and I got to sort through some of my own feelings about it.

Don Snider

But ultimately, I could not blame it on the media, because every time I could see something like that, I could see where the military couldâ€™ve done their part of this relationship better. My answer to the question of whatâ€™s the big rock in the rucksack that the public was carrying, and they finally said, â€œWeâ€™re done with this, weâ€™re not going to do this anymoreâ€â€”is time. We started out with some institutional liabilities, the greatest of which was the draft. If we had fought the war without the draft, the time that the American people would willingly have supported it wouldâ€™ve been longer.

Don Snider

But we simply ran out of time. And when you run out of time with the American peopleâ€”as weâ€™ve learned in subsequent warsâ€”they can be extremely fickle. Now, thereâ€™sâ€”as you well know, in the literature, thereâ€™s a lot of research on the time at which people will support something and the degree to which they will suffer casualties during that time, and whatâ€™s the influence of casualties on that time. However, the research also shows that the bigger issue of influence on how long people will support it is not the number of casualties, but it is the perception in the public of whether those casualties are in vain or not.

Don Snider

The minute the public perceives that a successful outcome is no longer possible, then, in true American fashion, they want no more bloodshed, because it will be in vainâ€”and they donâ€™t want that on their hands. So whenever an administration or a group of influential leaders can convince the public either that this war is not going to be successfully completed or it isâ€”notice the timing of this in Bushâ€™s surge in Iraq, just herded in as that public perception was about to fall off the edge of the table.

Don Snider

So frankly, by the time I went back to [the] Vietnam [War] the third time and left graduate school, Iâ€™m sure in my mind, if you had posed that question to me then the way you just posed it, I wouldâ€™ve said the public has had it, and we are not going to be successful, and that my best contribution is to go back and wind this thing down as honorably as possible. I didnâ€™t have that conversation in those wordsâ€”but looking back, I think thatâ€™s probably what my mindset was.

Interviewer

We donâ€™t have much more time, and I would love to pick this up and come back and do this againâ€”

Snider

Sure. I would, too, because we havenâ€™t got at all into any of the work at West Point.

Interviewer

No, but we should.

Snider

And this is all background to the work I did at West Point in renewing the study of profession.

Interviewer

Let me ask you, though, this one question, which comes off of what you just said, the difference betweenâ€”because you alluded to the war in Iraqâ€”the difference between [the] Iraq [War] and [the] Vietnam [War] of course, and very, very important, profound for the public support is that we had a draft during [the] Vietnam [War], and we donâ€™t have a draft anymore. And the consequence of losing lives in vain is more dramatic when they are conscripted, it would seem to me, than those who have assumed risk when they volunteerâ€”and for which the public feel they kind ofâ€”sadly, in my judgmentâ€”separation from the hurt, from the loss, from the injury.

Interviewer

Do you feel thatâ€™s one of the things that distinguishes Vietnam from Iraq?

Snider

To me, it is theâ€”theâ€”distinguishing feature between any comparisons of these two wars. First off, I think wars are far more fascinating when you look at the domestic sources of support for the war than when you look at the conduct of the war itself. Iâ€™ve alwaysâ€”Iâ€™m not a military historian. Iâ€™m a policy scientist, so I tend to view more about the war from the point of view of how do nations prepare for and go to war and support war? And clearly, without a doubt, the fact that we fought these two wars under different constructs of military manpower is the defining difference.

Don Snider

The draft was doomed. It took the Vietnam War to bring it to its knees, to highlight it, and to trash it. We lost a tremendous amount in terms of civic republican philosophy when you get rid of the citizen-soldier concept. Remember, the idea of the draftâ€”behind it, the civic republican concept behind itâ€”is that when you serve, you not only improve the republic, but youâ€™re improving yourself as a citizen. So it goes to this concept of development of citizenry. And weâ€™ve lost a lotâ€”part of itâ€™s isolation, part of itâ€™s emotional isolation, psychological distance.

Don Snider

But weâ€™ve gained a lot, too, because we have now a force of amazing dedication and capability, far higher military capabilities than we had at any time previous. And so, my own judgment, was it a good trade-off? Yes. Should we go back to a concept of national conscription for service so that we can get the development of citizens as servants of the society and as servants of the republic? Absolutely. And I thinkâ€”

Don Snider

I could be wrongâ€”but I think thereâ€™s still the potential for that, because as we work our way out of our fiscal crisis and try and reduce costs, weâ€™re going to find out that if we have a national service medical corps of some kindâ€”where young folks can work in the medical field for one or two years as national service as opposed to going into the military serviceâ€”not only can we reduce health care costs, we can solve a number of problems together. So I only add this to say that the idea of national service is not a dead issue. The draft is a dead issue. But the idea of national service, and the civic republican result you get from it, is very much a live issue.

Interviewer
Weâ€™ll stop here.