

THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE
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AN INTERVIEW WITH BOBBIE COLLINS

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INTERVIEW BY
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G. KURT PIEHLER: This begins an interview with Bobbie Collins on April 8th, 2004 at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, Tennessee with Kurt Piehler and ...

JOHN VINCENT: John Vincent.

PIEHLER: And I'd like to begin by asking you, could you tell me a little about your parents?

BOBBIE COLLINS: Okay, my mother and father was—my father was born in Grainger County. My mother was born here in Knoxville. They got married in 1941, I believe it was, right before ... World War II. And my father was shipped to—I think he went to the European countries, France and over in that area. And while he was gone, that's when I was born. Mother was a housewife till he came back from overseas.

PIEHLER: How old—you were born in 1942, in June of 1942. When did you first meet your dad?

COLLINS: I didn't meet my dad till, I guess it was probably '44 or '45 whenever he came back from the war over there.

PIEHLER: Do you remember meeting him or is that just lost in—you were very young, so do you have any recollection of meeting him?

COLLINS: No, not really I, uh, I can remember very little of that time. I guess my, memory starts probably back about '46. I can remember some things then that took place with him.

PIEHLER: Well since you raised some memories, what are the memories you had? Some of your early memories about particularly your father but growing up in general?

COLLINS: Well we, it seemed like we all lived with, when I was born, we all lived with my grandmother during the wartime. There was probably, my grandmother had probably three or four aunts [of my] and several kids all living in the same house because of the—with the war going on, people didn't have a whole lot of money and so they couldn't afford to go out and just get a house if they wanted to. So it was, they all lived together, and then... once my father came back from the war, I can remember him having a job with TVA and some of the little things that you remember. He drove a red Ford pickup truck and I remember that little ol' bitty truck that he drove and that's when I started remembering. After that, we ended up moving away to him buying his own house and that's when we started our life as a family.

PIEHLER: Where was your grandmother's house, do you remember roughly?

COLLINS: Yes sir, it was right down, it was on Oldham [Avenue]. At that time it was a thoroughfare just right at the edge of the city limits because that was sort of out of town at that time, in the '40's.

PIEHLER: And was your Grandmother connected to all the utilities? Did she have ...

COLLINS: Well, yes. We had all the utilities but, uh, it's just that the other parts of our family all stayed together.

PIEHLER: How crowded was—you sort of sense it was a crowded house.

Collins: It was a crowded house. You had, I think it ended up being, it was about twelve to fourteen.

PIEHLER: In how many rooms?

COLLINS: In a four-room house. (Laughter) It got crowded. But yeah that was, that was a ...

PIEHLER: And there were no men. I mean all the men ...

COLLINS: All the men was gone to war ...

PIEHLER: Yeah.

COLLINS: ... except my aunt's husband and he died about, I think he died in '44. He had a stroke. But yes all of the men were gone.

PIEHLER: I guess that's one of your earliest memories just being surrounded by women, is that ...

COLLINS: And loved every minute of it. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: What was your grandmother like? What do you remember about her?

COLLINS: She had some Indian in her; I sort of remember her facial features. She was a, not a mean woman, but she was a "hard" woman. What she said, she meant. And if she promised you something, you was sure you was going to get it. But in return, she looked out for, uh, for the younger kids. She took care of 'em.

PIEHLER: What are some of your early memories of your mother?

COLLINS: Well, mother, some of the memories of her was, she was sort of a laid back person. She didn't get excited. On up into her, probably in her thirties, she had a nervous breakdown, and after that she didn't let anything excite her.

PIEHLER: Do you remember anything about the war itself? I mean, you were very young, but I am curious were there any like vague memories that you have?

COLLINS: No, not really, um, not World War II. I don't, I don't remember hearing anything on the radio or anything.

PIEHLER: The earliest memories is, you said, sounds like '46.

COLLINS: About '45 or '46.

PIEHLER: And you remember for example your Dad's red truck, so that. I'm curious, what did your dad ever tell you about the war,? His war?

COLLINS: His war he wouldn't talk about.

PIEHLER: Not at all?

COLLINS: No. Most of your veterans today that had seen a lot, don't talk a lot about it. They try to forget as much of it as they can because it brings back too many bad memories. Just like I heard over the TV the other day. Some of the people that are dying in Iraq is a lonely death because you have no one there that is your loved ones. And it's just a lonely death.

PIEHLER: You get a sense your dad, he had a hard war and just didn't—he literally didn't talk about it?

COLLINS: No. Matter of fact, there was some—I had seen some of his medals that he had got during the war and I had seen some of the pictures of that he had taken when he was over there. And it seemed like it was all the pictures was snow, just pure white.

PIEHLER: Sounds like he was in the Bulge. Do you remember any of the medals he had gotten as a ...

COLLINS: No, I remember the good conduct medal that he got. And he had some others of different campaigns from over there, but I remember them.

PIEHLER: I'm curious ... even when you went into service yourself, he didn't have a conversation with you about the army or, you know, his experiences?

COLLINS: No. During my childhood, my father and I didn't a lot of talking. I think we was on different wavelengths. I finally, um, after I reached the age of seventeen, I decided that it was for me time to leave and that's when I went into the military myself. And he never, we never discussed his war and we never discussed my war. It seemed like he was a self-made individual as a lot of the older generation was. They sort of made their bed and they laid in it. And they didn't want nobody in it with them.

VINCENT: Did you ever try to talk to him about the war or about you joining the Marine Corps?

COLLINS: I had asked him if he would sign for some things for me prior to going in and he wouldn't assist me on getting anything, because of the way he was brought up. His father never assisted him in anything. That's reason why I say, he was a self-made individual and he was another hard individual to try to get to know and so he would—he didn't even recognize me being in a combat zone, not till the last time I went over there and, um, he finally made the comment “Well I got a son in Vietnam” and that was ...

PIEHLER: That's as close as your father ...

COLLINS: That's as close as we ever got.

PIEHLER: It sounds like he was a, if it's, the way you almost recount here, he was very emotionally distant. Is that ...

COLLINS: You could say that.

PIEHLER: Was he distant to your mother, to his wife?

COLLINS: To a degree. And he was also distant to, to my sister. I didn't have no brothers and I had one sister. And she married at a early age because there really wasn't a lot of love shown whenever we was growing up. Mother showed us love but, Daddy he was, he was a provider and that was about the extent of it.

PIEHLER: It sounds like your dad didn't have a lot of friends either. Did he have friends?

COLLINS: Not what I would call friends. He had several acquaintances but as far as friends, he didn't have a lot friends.

PIEHLER: How was he as a provider? You said he saw that as his role. You mentioned he first started working for TVA?

COLLINS: Right, well, after a few years with TVA he decided that he would go to work as a ... I guess you would say a supervisor at an awning company. And he worked at this awning company till the man died. His name was George Mann, he owned Knoxville Awning Company. So after George Mann died, Daddy bought the business and that's what he—he kept it for several years and then he branched out and changed the name from Knoxville Awning Company to AA Awning Company. And he spent most of his time building the business.

PIEHLER: Does the business still exist?

COLLINS: No, the business folded up back about 1992.

PIEHLER: But it sounds like it had a long run.

COLLINS: Yes he had an interview with the Knoxville News Sentinel because his ad was the first in the telephone book, (Laughter) AA Awning. I think finally after several years AA Air conditioning finally unseated him (Laughter).

PIEHLER: When you moved out of your Grandmother's home, what neighborhood did you move to?

COLLINS: Well, we moved over on Baxter [Avenue], right up above Palm Beach [Manufacturing]. And that's where we lived till the interstate. I attended Beaumont School. I attended Rule High School, and in 19, I think it was about '55, or maybe '57, they put interstate through there, I-275 it's called today. So we ended up having to move over into the South Knoxville area. So we moved out there on Browns Road. And we—I stayed there and attended Young High School for a year and I wanted to take a vocational part and Young's did not provide it, so I started going to Fulton to take up vocational school, and I took machine shop. And attended there for about a year and then when Daddy and I sort of had a little run-in, I decided it was time for me to move on. That's when I joined the Marine Corps.

PIEHLER: I want to ask you a little bit more about growing up, but it sounds like you probably went into the service to get away from home. I mean you sort of ... everything you have sort of indicated ...

COLLINS: Yeah I didn't, I guess you could say I really didn't have a good home life growing up and neither did, I don't think my sister did either because I think she got married at the age of fourteen.

PIEHLER: That's very young.

COLLINS: Right, so, and then yeah, we both left the house sort of young to just get away.

PIEHLER: What, I guess growing up, what did you do for fun growing up? It's a sort of broad question, but get out a lot of different answers.

COLLINS: Well, back then you didn't do a whole lot. You would go down and—down at Palm Beach and they had a bunch of what we called rubber trees, and the vines would grow up over top of them and you would get down there and walk across the top of those trees. (Laughter) And the next thing you done you played marbles. And then once you get up about seventeen, if you were fortunate enough to be able to have a car, then we went to, we started going to drive-ins.

PIEHLER: Where were the drive-ins then?

COLLINS: At that time you had all kinds. You had one out on Clinton Hwy, one out on Chapman Hwy, you had one down in the Bearden area, uh, you had one out in the Burlington area. We had a lot of 'em and a lot of bowling alleys, you could go bowling.

PIEHLER: So you—did you go bowling?

COLLINS: I went bowling.

PIEHLER: So bowling and going to drive-ins, particularly drive-in at a certain age as you said, you would go necking. (Laughter)

COLLINS: That's sort of like today they call it what? Making out? (Laughter)

PIEHLER: So did you go to the drive-in and do some necking when you were growing up?

COLLINS: I think we all did.

VINCENT: You want to put it on pause? (Laughter)

PIEHLER: I guess I'm curious 'cause you mentioned the highway came through, you lost your house when they built it. It was 275?

COLLINS: I-275 at, uh, ...

PIEHLER: How old were you when that happened?

COLLINS: I was probably about thirteen.

PIEHLER: What was that like to lose your—I mean how did your family feel about having to—and it wasn't just you ...

COLLINS: It was the whole community.

PIEHLER: Yeah, what was the sense of that?

COLLINS: They didn't seem like it really bothered 'em, they had just to relocate.

PIEHLER: No one was upset that they ...

COLLINS: No, No. It's not like it is today. You know, anytime somebody, the state tries to put a highway through now everybody wants to fight it. Back then they didn't do a lot of protesting. They accepted what the state offered and they moved.

PIEHLER: What was that neighborhood like—since it's sort of a neighborhood that doesn't exist literally at all, what was that neighborhood like? What do you remember about your neighbors?

COLLINS: I don't remember a lot about the neighbors. Some of them have already gone. Most of them are gone and most of the kids I don't remember because your talking fifty years or longer.

PIEHLER: But did you have a lot of friends in the neighborhood, did you play outside a lot?

COLLINS: I guess there might have been fifteen or twenty kids in that neighborhood. No we just played marbles and hide and seek ...

PIEHLER: Yeah, you mentioned the trees ... (Laughter)

COLLINS: ... and walked the trees, yeah.

PIEHLER: What about baseball or any sports, did you guys play ...

COLLINS: We played a little sandlot football, but that was, oh probably about ten to fifteen of us.

PIEHLER: Growing up, you mentioned bowling. Were you ever in a bowling league growing up?

COLLINS: No. On Friday nights and Saturday nights we would take and go from church and go to the bowling alley and bowl.

PIEHLER: Now was it just your friends or would you ever go with your parents?

COLLINS: No, my parents and I, we never done nothing.

PIEHLER: You never did ...

COLLINS: No, we never went on no kind of vacations, we never done nothing as a family as it is today.

PIEHLER: So there was no family picnics, or no ...

COLLINS: No, none of that. About the only thing that we did as a family was we would go up to my aunts and uncles up in Coryton, and that would be on Sunday afternoon. And that'd be it. We wouldn't do that every week. We'd only probably do that maybe once in a month.

PIEHLER: You mentioned going to church and then going bowling. How often did you go to church growing up?

COLLINS: Well, I tried to go at least once a week ... during my growing up age. I accepted Jesus Christ as my personal savior back in 1955 and it's not as if I've always lived for him, but I did accept him as my personal savior. I try to live for him today as much as I can.

PIEHLER: What church did you go to growing up?

COLLINS: When I was growing up I went North Knoxville Baptist Church, um, and that's where I go today. We've seen a lot of people come and go but we're still in the same church as we grew up in.

PIEHLER: Now would your family go together to church?

COLLINS: No.

PIEHLER: No, so you didn't even go to church as a family.

COLLINS: No, mother or daddy—mother went during the early days of her childhood, but Daddy, I don't think Daddy, he just very little went.

(Tape Paused)

PIEHLER: So, you just had a phone call come in. So your father didn't attend church that you know of?

COLLINS: No. He never attended as a family.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

COLLINS: He was sort of a hard individual to get to know, and like you said before, he didn't have no friends. He had a couple of drinking buddies but,

PIEHLER: Yeah.

COLLINS: ... As far as friends, no. There's no friends.

VINCENT: How did you become involved in church?

COLLINS: It was—it had been the church that all of my relatives, my aunts and my uncles, and cousins went to and it right up the street from where my grandmother lived. And so, I guess whenever I was first born during the wartime, mother took me up there as a baby. But once we moved away from there, I quit going until I started back in the mid 50's and I started hanging around with my cousin over on that side of town, and that's when I started getting back active in church. And that's ... when I went back.

PIEHLER: It sounds like your cousin was essential. You might not have gone to church at that point in time if it hadn't been for you cousin.

COLLINS: Uh, probably.

PIEHLER: Yeah, I mean, you never know ...

COLLINS: Him and I was close at that time and so, yeah he played a big part in my Christianity, and—back then.

PIEHLER: Um, growing up did you ... play war at all? Do you remember, or did you have any toy guns, or?

COLLINS: We had some toy guns, but we didn't play war. We played cowboy and Indian.

PIEHLER: Okay, so that, that was the ...

COLLINS: Back then we didn't play war we played war. We played cowboys and Indians, and now today they play war.

PIEHLER: I'm curious, did you go to any of the matinees still? The Saturday matinees to watch westerns?

COLLINS: Yes, they had one over in, we call it Happy Holler. It was right down from where the old Sears used to be. And that was a key point in the Knoxville area, was Sears. Because you could, people would come in from all over and they would park at Sears and catch a free bus and ride downtown. And they furnished their transportation to and from town. Yes, we attended a lot of matinees, the old John Wayne movies, and Tom Mix and ...

PIEHLER: So Tom Mix was still in your generation?

COLLINS: Right. And Lash Larue. I remember a lot of the old movies. I still like to watch them today. It sort of brings back some of my childhood.

PIEHLER: I'm curious, the old Sears, where was that located again?

COLLINS: Sears was located over there on Central ...

PIEHLER: Mmm Hmm. Think about ...

COLLINS: ... about four blocks off of Broadway. And Broadway being a major throughfare, coming from Kentucky going all the way into North Carolina, it was right down Broadway.

PIEHLER: No, it's funny, because my wife, her office recently moved off of Central, and she pointed out the old Sears building to me. And so that was a real, that parking lot became sort of what we might term now, "the park and ride".

COLLINS: Yes, cause Sears had another parking lot behind it that they kept, kept up, and we was able to park there too. And Sears was the first building that I can remember of having an escalator. And us kids thought that was really something to go over there and get on that escalator and ride it up and down (Laughter). Yeah, that was something then.

PIEHLER: I'm curious. You never took vacations, though it sounds as though your father could have afforded vacations, you just never traveled growing up.

Collins: Never. No, um, I guess we probably could but see, back in the 40's and the 50's money was a lot tighter then, a what it is today. Then you didn't have a whole lot of luxury items. You had your necessities, but you didn't have a whole lot of the other.

PIEHLER: So your father was doing okay, but not—how well was he doing in terms of that?

COLLINS: He was doing, he was providing. But he didn't give us our wants; he gave us our have-to's.

PIEHLER: At the time what were your wants? I'm just curious. What was the?

COLLINS: Well, my latter years I wanted an automobile, and he would not assist me in getting an automobile. That was one of the reasons why I left Knoxville.

PIEHLER: What about, what about television? When did your family get television? Do you remember?

COLLINS: The television was in nine, I guess it was probably in '55. We didn't have one, the guy down the street (Laughter) had one. And we used to go there every night (Laughter) cause they went for days and all we had was the test pattern. And we'd go down there and watch that test pattern and we just knew it was gonna come on. (Laughter) But yeah, we, all of us kids would go down and just sit and watch it for a while. "We're gonna be watching TV here before long."

VINCENT: What were your favorite shows? Do you remember?

COLLINS: Um, back then, nah, I really don't. Later on it was I Love Lucy. Any sitcom that, that has laughter in it, back then, I enjoyed. And that still goes today. I like shows that has got laughter to it. And not a whole lot of war.

PIEHLER: Mmm Hmm.

COLLINS: After a period of time you ... get burned out on the war.

PIEHLER: Um, I guess tied to that, what kind of music did you listen to growing up?

COLLINS: I listened to country and I listened to rock and roll. Um, we listened to a lot of Elvis. The women loved Pat Boone (Laughter), the—Johnny Mathis was the women's, Johnny Cash was the men. But generally it was country and rock and roll; and Conway Twitty. That's the kind of musical artists I listened to.

PIEHLER: I guess. I probably meant to ask when I asked you about vacations. Before you went to the Marines, how far from Knoxville had you traveled?

COLLINS: Probably Chattanooga was the furthest, 'cause, here we go back to my cousin and I decide—he says, you know on his daddy's side, the one that passed away, had an aunt that lived in Florida. so us boys, we really didn't get into any trouble, but we decided that we would run off from home and we was gonna go to Florida, and we got to Chattanooga and that's when we had to turn around and come back home. (Laughter) See money, money was tight back then. (Laughter) I think that whenever we left Knoxville we had about, um, maybe a dollar and a half between us. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: Which even then was not a lot of money. (Laughter)

COLLINS: But we had a good time and that was about it. That was about as far as I got out of Knoxville.

PIEHLER: And north of Knoxville, how far north did you...

COLLINS: Never got out Fountain City and Halls. That was about it.

PIEHLER: What about east. Did you ever get to the Smoky Mountain Park?

COLLINS: No. Didn't go there.

PIEHLER: What about Nashville? Did you ever make it?

COLLINS: No, never.

PIEHLER: So really, before the Marine Corps, you really hadn't left Tennessee.

COLLINS: No.

PIEHLER: Or even East Tennessee?

COLLINS: No, never. And just about in the Knoxville geographical area, was about the extent of my traveling. But then when I went into the Marine Corps, then I started doing some traveling. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: You mentioned starting at Beaumont Elementary School, in your old neighborhood, the old neighborhood that would be demolished by 275. What are your earliest memories of school?

COLLINS: I guess the—I remember some of the teachers, not by name. I had one teacher at Beaumont. It was a male teacher, and I don't remember his name, but I remember him. I remember Mr. Watson over at Rule. Rule was a junior high and a high. So when we left Beaumont and we go to Rule High School as a junior high. And then when we, after we moved, I started going to Young High School.

PIEHLER: And you mentioned that you went to Fulton because you wanted vocational.

COLLINS: Vocational school, yes. Uh, the army didn't provide it and we lived in that area, in the South Knoxville area, and so once we had—I had to sign a paper saying that I would furnish my own transportation to and from school. So that's whenever I started staying with my aunt and uncle and my cousins, where I could go to Fulton. And then after, I didn't finish Fulton, I went into the military before I finished.

PIEHLER: And your decision for going for vocational, what led you to do that? What did you think you would do after high school?

COLLINS: I was hoping to work as a machinist, but it didn't work out.

PIEHLER: But that was in high school, that was your ...

COLLINS: That was sort of like a goal of my, that I wanted to reach; be a machinist and my cousin, he did.

PIEHLER: He did become...

COLLINS: He became a machinist for Oak Ridge. But no, I went into the military.

PIEHLER: Did you, did you think, I mean where did you think—did you plan on staying in Knoxville after you graduated?

COLLINS: Yes, cause we never been where's else. Knoxville was it. Knoxville was home. Life didn't exist in any other part. It was all right here in Knoxville.

PIEHLER: Now, cause I should add, your mother was born in Knoxville; 1925. What about your Grandmother, was she...

COLLINS: I think my Grandmother was probably borned in Wartburg.

PIEHLER: But yeah, but still in East Tennessee?

COLLINS: Right, still in East Tennessee.

PIEHLER: And your father came from Grainger County.

COLLINS: Right.

PIEHLER: And I get a sense that his father came from...

COLLINS: Probably the same area.

PIEHLER: You didn't know your grandfather on that side.

COLLINS: No, I didn't know my grandfather or my grandmother on ...

PIEHLER: On your father's side. Um, one thing you mentioned cowboys and Indians and, even playing cowboys and Indians. What about playing war, you didn't play war games. What about war movies? Do any war movies stick out?

COLLINS: Now it does, but then, no. Matter fact you didn't see a whole lot of war, war movies. Most of—you would see was news clippings. That's what you would see at the, at the theater. They would show you like, news clippings of pilots and things flying their aircraft. But no, as far as being a war, war movie. They didn't have a whole lot of those.

PIEHLER: So you don't remember seeing the movie, like, *Flags of Iwo Jima*?

COLLINS: Oh no. That came years later.

PIEHLER: Yeah, yeah. So growing up it, sounds like it was mainly cowboys and westerns and then when you got a little older, it was good films you could neck by, was that ... if I describe your ...

COLLINS: You've got my childhood. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: Well, I guess, I want to ask, what about growing up in Knoxville in that period, what have I forgot to ask you about that when you sort of think back about growing up in Knoxville, and particularly what has remained the same and what is different about the Knoxville you knew growing up before joining the Marines?

COLLINS: I guess the people. A lot of the people that was here then and that are still living are still, they sort of do the same—in a way they're sort of laid back a little, they're not in a big hurry. That's what ...

PIEHLER: So that part is ...

COLLINS: It still sticks with me. The weather—if you—I think Knoxville, around Knoxville you've got some of the best weather going. The old saying used to be, "if you

don't like it now, hang around for thirty minutes (Laughter) it'll change." So, you could see a lot of the four seasons and during the fall, you got a lot of pretty colors, that comes out.

PIEHLER: What has changed from your Knoxville? Cause you mentioned two continuities, things that have stayed the same. What's different, though, about Knoxville that you remember? What strikes you as, really, except for the Marines, you've been a lifetime resident of Knoxville.

COLLINS: Well, the people that was raised in Knoxville, seems like they're easier, laid back a little, but then you got a, a bustle type of atmosphere now; hurry, hurry. Nothing goes fast enough. They've got a lot more highways, they've cut off some avenues, and they've opened up others. And they've got a lot more industry in here now, more, more of ways of making a living now than what it was back then. You didn't have a whole lot back then of making a—there was more of a mom and pop type of environment. Now it's the big commercialized stuff.

PIEHLER: So, you, it sounds like—where were the places you thought you could make a living growing up in Knoxville? What were the options you saw? 'Cause I remember you were saying you studied to be a machinist. What did you thing was out there before you went to the service?

COLLINS: Oak Ridge, TVA, and the University of Tennessee.

PIEHLER: Those were the—at the time ...

COLLINS: That was the big chance, yes.

PIEHLER: What about sort of—I know there were some mills in town, how was that for you?

COLLINS: That was—you had like the Goodall's. They was mostly seamstress, they made suits. Brookside, was a mill, and I think they made a lot of thread and a lot of fabrics and they provided, but they didn't—with them you just made a living.

PIEHLER: Yeah. So the employers you wanted were TVA, Oak Ridge, and UT.

COLLINS: Right, that's the ones that you could have more of your wants and, instead of just your necessities.

PIEHLER: What about Alcoa? How is that, was that far, was that a different town?

COLLINS: That was different town. Same way with Bearden. If you lived in Knoxville, Bearden was an all day trip. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: So Bearden was, yeah. (Laughter)

COLLINS: That was a trip. Um, you go to Halls, that was a trip. Now you know, you live in Halls, you work in Knoxville, or you live in Dandridge and you work in Knoxville. Traveling today is a lot different than what it was back in the 40's and the 50's. Although gas was a lot cheaper then. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: I'm curious because you mentioned in passing, and I should follow up. It sounds like the war that you have some memories of is the Korean War, um, even if they are vague from news reels.

COLLINS: That was, yeah, Korea was going on in the early 50's. I guess it was like 50, probably started out, what, like, '49?

PIEHLER: 1950, but close, yeah.

COLLINS: The latter part of '49, '50, '51, '52, '53. I think it sort of winded it down in 54 and that was—that is the people that I remember in the uniforms, standing on the corner. Then they felt toward a military man a lot different than what they felt toward a military man back in the '70's. I think that they feel toward a military man or a man in uniform different today than what they felt about a man in uniform back in the 70's. I think they feel more toward a man today in uniform like they did probably in the, uh, in World War II to a degree. And also during the Korea time. During the Vietnam era they didn't ... have a whole lot of praise for our military men like they're doing today.

PIEHLER: What do you remember about—you said your memories of these people in uniform, these soldiers in uniform and other service—did you know anyone, neighbors or close friends or family members who were in the service during Korea?

COLLINS: I remember one man that used to come up on the, right up the hill from where we lived on Baxter. He was a marine and I thought his uniform was so unique, and I guess maybe that was one of the reasons why I went into the Marine Corps.

PIEHLER: So you were really impressed by his uniform.

COLLINS: I was, yes. And he had went through some of the action in Korea and we seen his medals, and his badges, and we'd ask him, "What is that one for? What is this one for?" He would let us, he'd tell us about 'em. That's about what the Korea ... And we'd watch it on the matinees. They would show a, just a clip of some of the things that took place then.

PIEHLER: What did, um, this would sort of—what did you think growing up about communism? Or what did you know about communism?

COLLINS: I really didn't know nothing about communism. That didn't even go across my mind. Later on in life I started thinking about it, how the dictators was. And you know I feel that we've got some of it even here in America. You do as we say to do and

not as you want to do, to certain points. But ... I still think America is probably the best place in the world to live.

PIEHLER: Before we, I'm just ready to ask you about joining the Marines, so let me—but, do you have any questions about Knoxville, you know, the early Knoxville.

VINCENT: I think, in a certain way, your father was the same way as mine as far as being raised. You can learn a lot from your father, you know, from him being there and teaching you, but you can also learn a lot from him not being there. What did you learn from your father, as far as what you would do different with your own family?

COLLINS: I would show more love to my family than what he showed to his. And you're right, you do. You do learn by him not providing your wants 'cause you got to get out and you got to make your wants. If you wanted something bad enough, you would go and you would do something to get your wants. It made you more of a ... I don't want to say a provider, but it makes you more of a self-made individual. It gives you more of a value of what life is; that you've got to earn it, and it's not being given to you. That's one thing I learned from him. You have to stand on your, you have to stand on your own. And you have to, you have to make sure that you are able to provide for yourself and your family. Somebody else is not going to do it for you.

VINCENT: And when you first saw those news clips of ... the war, what was your first thoughts? Did you think it was romantic type, or did you think it was scary? How did you feel about it?

COLLINS: At first I thought it was ... exciting, okay? But if you see—you're seeing these guys in a war situation and you get all involved in what's going on at that time and it's just, uh, I think you fall into an exciting part. Thinking, "Oh, how I'd like to be there." Until you end up there, then you have a rude awakening.

PIEHLER: I guess, you've indicated why you were going to join the service. The question I have is why the Marines? You joined the Marines on November 30th, 1959 in Knoxville. Why the Marines and how did that all come about because you were not even eighteen, you said you were seventeen when you joined?

COLLINS: Back then you had, if you was under the age of eighteen, they didn't have a draft. So, as I said before, my father and I didn't get along all that great. So, I remember the man in the uniform, and I remember the recruiters in their dress blues, and I thought that was the sharpest uniform going. And that's the reason why.

PIEHLER: Where did you, cause you mentioned growing up the neighborhood kid who came back. But the recruiters, where did you first see the Marine Corps recruiters?

COLLINS: Seen them uptown. And they would come to the schools and talk to the seniors, and you would see them in the hallways.

PIEHLER: And the uniform really got you?

COLLINS: The uniform got me. (Laughs)

PIEHLER: And it is an impressive uniform just to add. The dress blues are really quite sharp. And where did you, you know, did you visit the recruiter at the recruiting station to sign up?

COLLINS: Yes I went up there and at that time you had to take a little exam. And I knew I wasn't going anywhere here in Knoxville, and so that's when I went up there and talked to them and they said, "Well, before you can go in you've got to get your mother and father to sign the paperwork." And I said, "Well, okay." Well, my father wouldn't sign for me a car or sign to help me get a drivers license. So I went back and said, "Well, since you won't help me get my drivers license or an automobile, would you sign for me to go into the service and he says, "Yeah, I'll sign for you." And so that's how come I ended up in the service. He sort of like, "Yeah, I'll sign for you, just to get you out of our hair."

PIEHLER: I'm curious. Growing up did you have any odd jobs, working?

COLLINS: I worked at a service station.

PIEHLER: Where was the service station?

COLLINS: It was out on Chapman Highway. It was a Texaco service station and the old guy that had it, he wanted me to stay there and help out, but I had another calling.

PIEHLER: So in other words, it sounds like you were trying to save money to buy a car.

COLLINS: I was. I had already picked one out.

PIEHLER: What was your ...

COLLINS: That car was a 1949 Chevrolet Coupe. And it was painted black and it just glittered. See, back then we didn't have these new cars, we had to go for the old ones and work on them ourselves.

VINCENT: How much did it cost, do you remember?

COLLINS: I think it was gonna be about six hundred dollars. It wasn't going to be much at all. But, you know, at that time six hundred dollars was a lot of money. The average person that worked forty hours a ... [week] brought home probably somewhere between 55 and 65 dollars a week and that was to pay the rent, utilities, phone, insurance, and put food on the table. So they didn't have a whole lot of money then. Six hundred dollars was a lot.

PIEHLER: Now, you described growing up you really had never, except for one attempt to run away, you never really left Knoxville. So after you signed up, how quickly did you go to boot camp? When did you actually leave Knoxville and how did you leave Knoxville?

COLLINS: We left Knoxville on a bus. I think it was about 8 or 9 of us. And we didn't have a swearing in place in Knoxville. They shipped everybody to Nashville. So we went to Nashville and that's where we were sworn in at. And then that's when they gave you a ticket, if you was in the Marines; they gave you a ticket to Parris Island.

VINCENT: One ticket to paradise. (Laughter)

(Sneeze)

VINCENT: Do you feel like the recruiter told you the truth? How many questions did you ask and what kind of information did they give you?

COLLINS: There were not a whole lot of questions that were asked. Because not being, ever being in, it you really didn't know what to ask. He didn't tell me how it was going to be when I got there, no. (Laughter). And once I got there I thought oh, my goodness, I've heard of these places, but I didn't think I was ever going to end up in one of them. But it—they have a tendency to break you down and then build you up. And they will build you up a whole lot higher than what they'll ever tear you down.

VINCENT: What had you heard about Marine Corps basic training? Had you heard any rumors or first hand stories about basic training?

COLLINS: Yes, I'd heard—the guy next door to me was in World War II, in the Marine Corps. And he would tell me some of the things that took place, but you know it was just a—I thought that is a tough organization so I'll give it a try.

PIEHLER: So you had some sense of what you were getting into.

COLLINS: Some.

PIEHLER: Some, but very ...

COLLINS: (Laughter) But it wasn't like it—nobody sat down and said hey, “This is what you're going to end up in.” When you get to Parris Island, you're going to think your world's come to an end. And they didn't tell you that (Laughter). They just tell you, “Hey, when you get to Parris Island, it's going to be different.” And it was different

PIEHLER: Well, could you think back to your initial impressions as a young recruit who really hadn't left Knoxville. So, one, is just—you're near the water. I mean in a sense your in a very different climate. Some of your earlier impressions were ...

COLLINS: In the Marine Corps, you didn't go near the water.

PIEHLER: Yeah, I ... (Laughs)

COLLINS: When you get to, well whenever I got to Parris Island, I was put into a barracks and the only time you went out of that barracks was when they took you out on what they called the drill field. And they marched you around or they took you out for PT. When they got done doing that, they brought you back inside the barracks. You didn't get a lot of free time. Some branches of service I've heard that will take and once you're in there six or seven weeks they will give you a base liberty, where you can go to the PX or different places, but whenever I went in they didn't have none of that. The only time you got a base liberty was the day after graduation. So we was all in a controlled environment from the time you go in to the time you graduate.

VINCENT: What was your, when you got off that bus at Parris Island, and you saw those drill instructors, what exactly was going through your head, at that time, in a nutshell?

COLLINS: Well, whenever I got there, I didn't think it was too bad when I first got there 'cause he hadn't gotten on the bus yet (Laughter). But when he got on the bus and he told everybody that was chewing gum that they better get rid and they couldn't take it out of their mouth, I knew that some of the guys was in trouble, 'cause they had to swallow it. And then when he said, "You've got 30 seconds to get off this bus", and you probably have forty, forty-five people on that bus, and he said, "You got thirty seconds to get off that bus and get on those footprints out in the street," you didn't have a whole lot of time to think. The only thing you wanted to do is for the guy in front of you to hurry up cause he was taking your time. It was a different feeling. But then after that, that initial shock wore off after a couple of days. Some of my deepest memories that I try to relate to the most now is going through the rifle range. We had two Mexicans that were our junior drill instructors and one of them was in Korea and he apparently had done some fighting, because whenever we would go to the mess hall and after chow we would form back into platoon and we'd be on the street. And I could see him today, they would wear a duty belt with a little first aid pouch on the back of them. He would hook his hands around that first aid pouch on his back and walk from—up and down in front of the platoon and he'd say, "Now when you get into combat, you will look for ... sun to go down, that will be one of your high points, of your daily duty is looking for that sun to go down. And then during the night, after everything's over with, the next high point is you'll be looking for that sun to come back up. Because when you do that, you know, "Well, I made it through the night." When you see the sun go down, you say, "Well, I made it through the day." So it's, um, I didn't relate to that at that time, but once you get into a combat area, and I think you've been in some of it, you can relate to what people has told you. And you really, you think about it and it becomes real.

PIEHLER: And it sounds like you, at the time, you didn't fully appreciate what he was saying but that later, it strikes me as this was very memorable for you. As you said you could almost see him standing there.

COLLINS: Oh yes. Another time he says—that's when you get choked up when I discuss things like that. Whenever he would say, he would have us to look to the man on our right and look to the man on our left, and he would say, "If you're all in combat together the man on the right or the man on the left will probably not come back." And that didn't sink in either, not until you actually see what he was referring to. You know you can always tell a man that you know, if you paint this with this color of paint, it's gonna be black, but he can't relate to that, not until he sees you paint that thing and it becomes black. Then you can relate to what he was trying to tell us.

VINCENT: Any memorable characters in your platoon when you were in basic training? Do you remember anybody that stood out as far as being a clown or anyone that got picked on a lot or anybody like that?

COLLINS: No. Going through boot camp you didn't have clowns. Like I said, it was a controlled environment. It was a "Yes sir, no sir" time. They told you when you was going to eat, they told you when you was going to go to the bathroom, they told you when you was going to take a shower. It was strictly a controlled, controlled environment. They'd tell you what you're gonna to do, when your gonna do it, and how you're gonna to do it. They held a lot of classes on survival. They taught you how to use weapons, they taught you how to ... hand to hand combat. You got a twelve-week course on how to defend yourself and your nation.

PIEHLER: What was your most, sort of, difficult moment in those twelve weeks? Did you have any one particular moment or incident?

COLLINS: I wasn't under a lot of stress. I pretty well done what I was told to do and when they told me to do it. One thing I remember was back in the 50's the girls used to write the boys and what they used to say, "Sealed with a kiss" they would take and blot their lips on the back of the envelope showing, you know, well they'd sealed it with a kiss. That one drill instructor he says—and we would have to run in the squad bay and he would hold our mail out between two fingers and we would have to go run through it and (Clapping sound) clap it in between our hands, and (Laughter) when we'd get through he would say, "Okay private, do you like that?", and I'd say, "Yes sir!" "Well you eat that then." And that's what, it didn't take me long, and I wrote to a couple of the girls that was writing and said, "Do not blot your lips on the back of that envelope." (Laughter).

PIEHLER: Because he would literally make you eat the envelope.

COLLINS: Oh yes, yes. And my mother during the Christmastime sent a box of candy and all of that. So he said, "Do you want this?" and I said, "No Sir!" (Laughter) I said, "I would rather see it shared to our platoon, and he said, "Okay", but everybody shared that box of candy. But yeah, they didn't want you to have any of that. But it was—then after about, after that twelve weeks, they had what they call an advanced infantry training. They gave you more, uh, self-defense, hand to hand, uh, sometimes they even got into other weapons, like machine guns and the 45 [duty handgun]. And than they would teach

you some on that and that would be for about two weeks. And then you'd go back down to Parris Island for graduation. That's when you started getting your liberty. That's when you started getting your uniforms.

PIEHLER: I'm curious, you mentioned serving—two people who really impressed you, these two Mexican drill instructors. Did you have any black recruits in your platoon?

COLLINS: I had—there was two that stood out. One of 'em was a, he had been in the Air Force for three years, and the other one had been in the Army for three years.

PIEHLER: And they were both recruits? They were going through boot camp just like?

COLLINS: Yes. Although you had probably went through one of the other branches of service, you still had to go through the Marine Corps boot camp just like everybody else did.

PIEHLER: Do you know why they ... joined the Marines after being in these other two branches? Because you still remember they had been in these two other branches.

COLLINS: I have no earthly idea. I, today I would tell a man if your gonna go into a branch of service go in the Air Force, 'cause they have ... a lot of good schools. So does all branches of service, but I think that the Air Force is more of a, oh, how do I want to say it, more of a leisure type, university type atmosphere than like it is probably in the Army or the Marine Corps.

PIEHLER: I wouldn't put leisure and the Marine Corps in the same... (Laughter). You mentioned very early when you were talking about the Marine Corp is that they tear you down and that was sort of a shock, but then you also said that they really did build you up. When did that shift? When did you get a sense that you were starting to be built up and that—and you said it was like you were built higher, you know, they did tear you down, but they build you up past where you had been.

COLLINS: Well ,you know, when you go in you don't know what you're getting into. And so they do, they sort of tear you, tear your self-esteem down. But then once you hit to a, you won't hit ... bottom, but you'll get down low. And then that's when you start building back up, uh, they start building your self-esteem, saying you know, "You can do this, you can do that." And they just keep on working with you and by the time you get out of there you know that you can go to a war zone and you can prove and take care of yourself, to a point.

PIEHLER: I'm curious, when you were going through training what did you think, "I really can't do that." But you said that they sort of convinced you that you can do these things. Is there any specific things that they taught you that you go in afterwards, "Wow, he's right, I really can do this!"

COLLINS: Physical exercise. You know a lot of branches of service stresses a lot of physical exercise. You go into the Army, you go into a jump school, everywhere you go, you run, you don't walk. They don't want to see you walking. And the same way in the Marine Corps. When you go in the Marine Corps, you go in as an infantryman, and that's what you are. Throughout all your Marine Corps career, that's it. That's your basic ... MOS [Military Occupational Specialty]. Although you may have a different job, but your primary is a infantryman and at any given time they can pull you out of your occupational field and put you in the infantry, and you ...

PIEHLER: And you always felt that, in the Marines, even when you in other jobs, at heart you were an infantryman.

COLLINS: At heart you really was, right. No matter where you was at. You always had that self—I guess it's just sort of a self-assurance that you could maintain, and that you could take and survive a lot of stress. And that has helped me throughout my lifetime.

PIEHLER: One thing I always liked to—it's a standard question which we haven't brought up about basic particularly is KP [Kitchen Patrol]. Did you get any KP Duty?

COLLINS: I think everybody gets some KP (Laughter) I think I ended up with about two weeks. The whole platoon, they would take a whole platoon and put you at one mess hall. But I had it, I had it sort of made because during my time at KP I was worked as a waiter in the officer's mess. They would come in and I would ask them what they would like to have for breakfast, and they would tell me and I'd go get it and bring it back to them. As far as washing the pots and pans (Laughter) and scrubbing the dishes, I got out of that.

PIEHLER: You got, in some ways the lighter KP duty it sounds like. (Laughs)

COLLINS: I did not have to—you know they got the old, the old pictures of a man sittin' in front of this big old barrel of potatoes and him peeling those potatoes, and I never had that.

PIEHLER: In terms of, um, you mentioned going into advanced you could sense the change, you started getting uniforms, and it sounds like the way your instructors were interacting with you changed a bit. What about advanced training sticks in your mind? Particularly in terms of the skills you had learned?

COLLINS: Well, that, when you got to the advanced part, they started treating you differently. It's just like, going through a school of; grammar school, you are treated one way, but when you advance to junior high, you are treated another way. And then once you are in to high school, you're sort of treated in a different way. And when you get to college, you are treated in a different way. That's sort of like it is in the military. As you advance along, you are treated different. Same way with being promoted. As you advance in promotions, you are, you get more responsibility, but along with the

responsibility you are treated different. They have a different outlook on you. You probably seeing that today, ain't you?

VINCENT: Yes, exactly.

VINCENT: What was your ... occupational field?

COLLINS: My occupational field was, first when I went in, I was a, I was a infantryman. I spent four years in the infantry. My first duty station was division recon, and they did not believe in walking either. Everywhere we went we ran, if we was able to run. A lot of times we done, we done a lot of rubber boat amphibious training. We trained in the winter time and summer time. We would take these ... big rubber rafts in December, January, February, the coldest months and we would take them to the ocean, and we would go into the ocean and paddle our way back in. We would have to—you have like an eleven man crew, you have five on each side with what they call a coxswain in the back that steers the rubber raft, and when you get to a point coming in, the coxswain would say, "Number one and number two man, out!", and they would put their paddles inside the boat and roll off ... out of the boat and they would start swimming to shore guiding it in. So that's, that was the first duty station.

PIEHLER: Where were you stationed, was it?

COLLINS: I was stationed at Camp LeJuene. They had a place at Camp LeJuene called Stone Bay. And we was out there, it's about oh probably twenty-six miles from Jacksonville.

PIEHLER: Jacksonville, Florida.

COLLINS: No, Jacksonville, North Carolina

PIEHLER: Oh, okay, yes.

COLLINS: It is located right outside of, Jacksonville, North Carolina, about fifty miles north of Wilmington.

PIEHLER: Mm Hmm, and it's not too far from Greenville, I think, and Cherry Point.

COLLINS: Cherry Point, No. It's about, oh, about forty-five ...

PIEHLER: Yeah, I mean it's about ... I have a general sense.

VINCENT: So how far out in the ocean would you all go and paddle in?

COLLINS: Uh, you would go out beyond the breaks. The breaks, you know when you're talking about your waves coming in? That's, we'd go out beyond it.

VINCENT: So would you be able to see the shore?

COLLINS: Oh yeah, yeah. You'd see the shore.

VINCENT: Okay.

COLLINS: Then that's when we would come back in. We had to go through a school at Little Creek, Virginia and we'd do the same thing. And that's up in Virginia. And I think whenever I went through it up there it was in February and March, and it got pretty cool up there. Especially in the wintertime.

PIEHLER: And you lived in barracks on base?

COLLINS: Yes, I lived in a barracks. And then I had a, an opportunity to either go to force recon or go to the Philippines. And whenever that came up I went to—I figured since I was in the Marine Corps, I would like to see all the world that I could see, and so I took the opportunity to go to the Philippines. I ended up at Subic Bay, over there in the Philippines.

PIEHLER: And that must have been, it sounds like that was around 1964? Is that—or '65?

COLLINS: No. When I went to the Philippines, it was during the first four years.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

COLLINS: That was in '61.

PIEHLER: '61. So you, after basic and advanced, you then went to Jacksonville.

COLLINS: Right.

PIEHLER: And then you went—you had the opportunity to go to the Philippines, the Subic Bay.

COLLINS: Subic Bay, yes.

PIEHLER: And, what was that—I mean first of all what was it like cause you, for someone who hadn't traveled out of Knoxville. In some ways you didn't go that far, but now you've really gone far, I mean, you went halfway around the world.

COLLINS: Pretty close. It—it was a change. It didn't bother me any to do the traveling. I sometimes I would say [to myself], "Here this guy is eighteen year old and he can't even go from Halls to Knoxville in a car and here I am at seventeen, and I've been halfway around the world. It just—going through the boot camp and going through what

we went through at the early stages of our lives. It gave us the confidence that we could make these adventures and be able to make it, come through it.

PIEHLER: So in other words, it sounds like you would have been someone, if I had said to you, say, at sixteen, “You know, you’re gonna go to the Philippines in a few years.” You would have probably dismissed that, um that notion of just traveling like that. But the boot camp you had the ...

Collins: After boot camp, yeah, that’s, after getting out of there, then you had the ... confidence that was instilled in you that you could go and do these things. You could go to these places. You didn’t have to worry about getting’ lost. You knew where you was going to. You grow up a lot sooner while you’re in the military.

PIEHLER: At Subic Bay, what were your duties? What did you ... you know ...

COLLINS: I was a security guard. We was—I was up at Cubi Point. And at Cubi Point was, uh, where they had the bombs and they had, what they call a atomic underwater weapons. And we had to ... be cleared to be able to do that. You had one, two, three; you had about three or four checkpoints that you had to go through before you ever got to the post because of security. And each point that you had to go through, you had a certain colored badge that you had to wear. And so that’s—it was exciting. It was another step in my life that, uh, that instilled more responsibility and showed me that ...

----- END OF TAPE I -----

PIEHLER: This continues an interview with Bobbie Collins on April 8th, 2004 at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, Tennessee with Kurt Piehler and ...

VINCENT: John Vincent

PIEHLER: And you said—the tape just cut you off—you had—I think as I remember, you said you had a sense of responsibility. You felt like this was important and as you were saying afterwards ...

COLLINS: Right, and it’s building you, your self-esteem, knowing that you could do the different jobs that they assigned you to. And you took that responsibility.

PIEHLER: You also said you were guarding nuclear weapons.

COLLINS: It was atomic underwater weapons. You had a compound they was located in and to get inside that compound you had to exchange your badges. And the fence that went around it had a electronic wire around the top of it, and even if a bird would land on that wire it would set of an alarm.

PIEHLER: Mm Hmm.

COLLINS: And you had the man that was in this booth. He was all sealed in, fire, well bulletproof windows and things in it and steel doors. And he would call down to the other sentry and tell him that, “Hey on part number six of the fence you got an alarm,” and they would have to go and check and see what caused the alarm. Yes it was—wasn’t allowed to talk about it and still [can’t] and it’s been forty-some years.

PIEHLER: Well we don’t even have a base that’s there anymore so (Laughter) I think it’s safe now. (Laughter)

COLLINS: I would like to go back there. I would like to go back and just see how it is now. We done, we done some traveling while I was over there. We visit Manila, visit Clark Airbase. We went to, um, what they called a place called Baguio, and Baguio sort of reminds you of the Smoky Mountains. They had a, like a barracks-type quarters and we stayed in it for, oh my goodness, about four days. It was a beautiful place.

PIEHLER: How many Philipinos did you meet while you were in the Philippines?

COLLINS: I met several, but as far as meeting them, remembering them? I don’t remember them.

PIEHLER: Where would you meet them? I mean where would you encounter Philipinos? Sort of on a day-to-day basis and then when you traveled?

COLLINS: Well, when you go to town you would meet them in the shops or you’d meet them in the barracks. Everybody had a, what they call a houseboy. He took care of your shoes, made sure they were shined, made sure that your bunk was always made, made sure that all your clothes were done up.

PIEHLER: Stuff that you used to have to do. (Laughter) So you had that in the Philippines in ’61.

COLLINS: Yes. And you had to pay for it. And then they had a mess hall that was manned by a couple of Philipinos, and they was—it was a good experience. I think, uh, every young man should go into the military and serve at least two years and give them, uh give them an idea how some of them were.

PIEHLER: How long were you in the Philippines for?

COLLINS: I was in there for eighteen months.

PIEHLER: Mm Hmm. So you didn’t leave until ’63.

COLLINS: Um, I was there—no, I was there in ’61, and I left there in ’62.

PIEHLER: When in '62?

COLLINS: October. Came back to the ... states.

PIEHLER: I'm curious, where were you when in the Cuban Missile Crisis took place? Do you remember? Were you still in the Philippines or?

COLLINS: Um, when did that happen?

PIEHLER: October of '62; October or November.

COLLINS: I had just come back to the states. I had went back to Camp Lejuene, and they had moved out a lot of, a lot of people, but I didn't—I missed that one. But now a lot of them that was in the—whenever I came back from the Philippines, I went to 6th Marines, an infantry unit. And they had moved a lot of them out to Cuba.

PIEHLER: Mm Hmm.

COLLINS: But ... I didn't have to go over there. A lot of them was extended by the convenience of the government, anywhere from ninety days to a hundred and eighty days.

PIEHLER: So that sticks out in your mind as extended for the ... (Laughter)

COLLINS: There was some ... upset people there (laughter). They wanted to get out and they wouldn't let them get out because they were sending them to Cuba.

PIEHLER: For the convenience of the government. (Laughter)

VINCENT: So you signed up for an initial four years? Or six? Was it four years?

COLLINS: My first enlistment was for four.

VINCENT: Okay.

COLLINS: And then after the four years—whenever I came back from the Philippines, I got married. And—to a ... beautiful woman. She was a she was my sweetheart before I went in, and she was a special, special lady. And, uh, we got married. So that was in October, and then when I went to LeJeune, she was able to go down there with me. How did we get on that subject? (Laughter)

PIEHLER: Where did you live?

COLLINS: We lived down there right outside of Jacksonville. Until, um, I guess we were there about six or seven months and I had to go on a med cruise and so then she came back home. And found out that she was expecting and so it came time for my

enlistment to be up and I says, “Okay, this is a time we’re gonna have to sit down and do some thinking and, uh, about what we’re going to do and where we’re going to go.” And I said, “You know, I could get out.” Our baby was due in January and it was November. And you know getting out in November, going home, chances of getting a job anytime soon is slow because in the Knoxville area in the wintertime, things do slow down. So I said, “Now, if we decide to make the military a career we’re going to have to stick with it and go for it all.” And so ... she said, “Well, let’s go for it all.” And so I said, “All right.” And that’s when I reenlisted.

VINCENT: Was there any point before that, like when you got out of basic training and your job skill training or anything that you said, “I like this, I want to stay in.” Or did you hate it the whole time and then after you got married, you figured that would be plan B? How did you feel about that?

COLLINS: No. Whenever I first went in—I never did hate it. It was giving me something that I did not have before. It was giving me, um, travel. I could go places, I could see things, I could do things that I could never do if I stayed here. So as far as disliking the military, I never did. The option of staying was done on the basis of, here you are, you got a wife, you got a child on it’s way, and when you come out you have no insurance, no nothing; you better think about where you’re at, what you can do. I guess it was thinking about how you could be the best provider in that situation. So that’s the reason why I decided to, or we [decided]. I think that a man and a woman that are married often make the decisions together. So, I did not make that decision alone; we made that decision together. And I guess that’s the reason why we pretty well stayed together. Because we made that decision together. And although we had some rough times, we, uh, the good times sure outweighed the bad times.

PIEHLER: I’m curious. Military pay is still not very good on the enlisted ranks. Back then, once you got married, how far did your check stretch? And did your wife work when you first got married, when you were living ...

COLLINS: When we first got married, yes she worked. She just about had to, cause at that time I think my base pay was \$123.00 a month. When you got married they—some way or another the government gave your wife fifty dollars a month, and then you was able to draw community rations. They was paying you not to eat on base. So we could do that, and that’s what you lived off of.

PIEHLER: That’s not a lot of money. (Laughter) I mean even back then, the cost of living was less, but even by that standard it wasn’t a lot of money (Laughter).

COLLINS: You counted your pennies and you shopped well. When you went to the grocery store you looked for bargains. And a lot of that is carried on today when we go looking to find—we try to look for a bargain cause we know how it is. And the retired plan ain’t all that great either, okay, not for the enlisted ranks, but it’s better than nothing.

PIEHLER: One of the things, I'm struck, I'd be curious if you've even thought of it. In the late 50's and 60's there's a civil rights movement going on, but a lot of the South is still segregated, but you are in military bases that are integrated. What was it like to go back and forth from sort of integrated military bases and the segregated—still, what is still segregated. Particularly, you know, in states like the Carolinas.

COLLINS: I never had no problem. I always tried to base it on—I didn't judge a man by his color of his skin. I judged his heart. I've had a lot of good black people that, hey, they'd do anything I asked them to do, and same way with me, I'd do anything they asked. But one of them, in the Philippines, there was one that got up behind me, and I guess he was fixing to stab me in the back and one of the black guys that knew me was behind him, and he said, "Now listen, you cut that white boy, I'm going to cut me a black boy." So, you know you can have friends on either side and I did.

PIEHLER: I'm curious of this incident that you describe, why ...

COLLINS: When you get out, when you was down in the Philippines they was a lot of alcohol that you could consume and you did that. And when you get a lot of alcohol floating around anything can happen. So, uh, but yeah, I had a lot of good black people that worked for me, and I served under a lot of good black people.

PIEHLER: And your wife eventually gave birth. Were you with her when she delivered?

COLLINS: No. No, she was by her—she was here ...

PIEHLER: In Knoxville.

COLLINS: ... with her mother, yeah.

PIEHLER: And so when did you get to see your first child? How long ...

COLLINS: She was probably, maybe, two months, three months old.

PIEHLER: Before you got to see her.

COLLINS: Before I got to see her, right. And then our second child was borned in '69.

PIEHLER: Mm Hmm.

COLLINS: In '69. And then I was here for the birth of that one. I was on my way back to, I was on my way back or on my way to Vietnam, for the first time, and, no, the second time and she was expecting and I said, hey, "If you will have the doctor get a hold of the Red Cross," I was in California, "The Red Cross will get me back home and I can be there for the birth. But, if I had it to do over, I wouldn't have come home.

PIEHLER: Why?

COLLINS: Um, I guess it was having to leave after the baby was just six days old and it being on Christmas Day.

PIEHLER: That's the day you had to leave?

COLLINS: I left out of McGee-Tyson Air Base at about 6:30 Christmas Day.

PIEHLER: In the evening or the morning?

COLLINS: In the evening.

PIEHLER: Oh okay. Now that sounds—so in some ways that bonding, in some ways you, cause you did it both ways...

COLLINS: Right. I wouldn't have come back. I'd have waited and seen her after I come home.

PIEHLER: Now you said you had a cruise, the Mediterranean.

COLLINS: Yes, I, uh, went to Spain; that's where I seen my first bullfight. I went to, uh, Naples. I went to Cannes, France. We just hit a port about every two weeks that we went on liberty. And the other every two weeks, we would be on some operation in different, different countries and that was, that gave me a chance to see more of the world.

PIEHLER: Well, it sounds like you really took advantage of the opportunity. I mean you went to a bullfight. I mean, what other sort of quote, unquote tourist things did you do, when you had a chance.

COLLINS: I was able to go to, uh, to Rome and walk around Rome and walk around Naples and these different places.

PIEHLER: What did you see in Rome? I mean does anything stick out that?

COLLINS: Um, Just some of the old buildings, that stuck out. And you know, some of the—I don't remember what you call it, where they got the columns.

PIEHLER: The Coliseum?

COLLINS: Sort of like a Coliseum and where it all fell down except those three...

PIEHLER: Oh, I know what you're saying, yeah.

COLLINS: I think they got about six or seven ...

PIEHLER: Pillars, yeah. I've seen—I can't think of the name, but I've ...

VINCENT: The Parthenon?

PIEHLER: No, I've seen pictures of it, but I know—I can't think of the name myself.

COLLINS: I seen that and it just you know—seeing another country and seeing how they live, and they do live different. After I made the Med cruise and seeing all those countries, I ended up going to Vietnam the first time and then the second time, and then I went to Japan. Japan lived different than what they do over on that side. Their, uh, living quarters are different. The living quarters over in the European world is sort of like our world. Over in the Far East, they've got a different way of living. Their living quarters are different. So it just a lot of changes and I was glad that I was able to see the difference in their culture.

PIEHLER: What struck you at the differences? Can you just say a little bit more? You got to see some of Europe, you were in Japan, you were in the Philippines. What struck you, you know and then in America, several different places. What struck you as the differences and what are some of the things—any similarities?

COLLINS: I'd say it was ... culture and their living environment, how they lived, where they lived ... how they traveled. How their country had advanced, their growth. Things of that nature.

PIEHLER: Well, let me ask you in another way. What country impressed you the most or were you most surprised at that you didn't expect? What sort of—particularly when you first encountered it.

COLLINS: Um, the European countries, in a way, sort of remind you of America.

PIEHLER: Even then, even back in the 60's?

COLLINS: That sort of reminds you of America. But then you get on the other side and it is completely different. They don't have the, oh, sanitation, uh, facilities like we do here in America, like they did over in the European countries. Um, they seemed like they was more open with—things. It didn't, it didn't upset them to have a bathhouse set out there, ok. And people going in it, uh, ...

PIEHLER: So you went to a Japanese bathhouse and (Laughter)...

COLLINS: I didn't say I went to one. (Laughs)

PIEHLER: Yeah, but your ... (Laughter)

COLLINS: I'm aware of one.

PIEHLER: You never went to a Japanese bathhouse (laughter), but you knew that this was ...

COLLINS: I knew it was there. And same way with—whereabouts we have drainage ditches here that are covered up and all, over there they used to refer to them as benjo ditches. And some of that could be open, some of that could be closed. It was different in their living environment.

PIEHLER: What about food? Cause you got that—particularly it sounded like in Europe you got to sample some of this food. But also in of the other places you were. What foods did you like or did you sample?

COLLINS: Um, well, in the Far East you sample a lot of the rice, cause that was—rice and noodles, uh, the Philippines had a dish they called it Pancit.

PIEHLER: Mm Hmm.

COLLINS: And it had real little noodles in it and it had a lot of vegetables in it that was in—usually put soy sauce on top of it. That was good. And then they had what they call an Omurice. That's a—you had your fried rice and all and it was in a egg-like ... cover. So that ... was another thing. But yeah their eating is different. Over there they use the chopsticks. In the European countries they have advancement. They've got eating utensils, it's a—it is an experience. And if you go to these places with that in mind you can see a lot of ...

PIEHLER: So you generally, you liked being at these different places it sounds like, um, in terms of the opportunity to see them. Is that a fair ...?

COLLINS: Yes sir. There are places I'd like to back. During one of my tours at Camp Lejeune, we had, um, we had a little cruise and went to Vieques, Puerto Rico. And during the time I was down at Vieques, I was able to go to San Juan. And so we went over there. Well that was back in the—I guess early 60's or something like that. And I was, here a few years ago, the wife and I went on a cruise, and one of our stops was San Juan and I said, "You know, I would like to go back down there. I would like to see that country again." And there's a lot of difference in forty years.

PIEHLER: What was the difference, I'm curious.

COLLINS: The, uh, I guess you could say the, uh, buildings and how they, how they live today compared to how they did forty years ago. You could see where they advanced so much more, got bigger buildings, more up-to-date cars, it just, you could see where they advanced. They've also went to more of a, what do you call it tourism. They got more into tourism down there. So they have all these cruises come in. That helped their economy out. I would like to go to these.

PIEHLER: Yeah, it sounds like you still, some of these places you want to go back to.

COLLINS: I do. I would love to go back to, uh, the Philippines. I would love to go back to Japan. I would like to go back to, uh, Naples, you know, Italy. I would love to go back to, oh, France, some of the places over there. I would like to just see, see the country again. And I would go with a, with a different outlook than what I went with the first time.

PIEHLER: Well, what was your outlook the first time?

COLLINS: Just to see what you could see. And the next time I would take me a camera, take more pictures.

PIEHLER: Mm Hmm.

COLLINS: Something I could take and hold on to, other than just in your mind. I've got memories about it ...

PIEHLER: Yeah.

COLLINS: ... but after, uh, after, uh, after a period of years—how do I want to say this? Like over at church I made a comment one time. You've got your memories, but once something happens, those memories leave just as being memories, then they become precious memories. And I would like to go back and take pictures and that would become precious memories to me, 'cause knowing this time I would never be able to go back again. That's how I'd look at it this trip.

PIEHLER: I'm also curious, the Mediterranean was your first real extended cruise, what's it be like to be a Marine aboard a Navy ship?

COLLINS: It wasn't bad. It, uh—you have tight living quarters—The living quarters is—you got a walkway about thirty inches and then you got these, well back during that, my time, you had a bunk that had a piece of canvas as the mattress and then you laid on it. But yeah it—you are second, the Navy is first aboard ship. But you have a tendency to—anytime you get two groups, two branches of service, you going to have some conflict and that's what, you just do—a Marine don't move fast enough for some of the sailors, and the sailors don't look good enough for a Marine. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: I guess once you're aboard a ship, what was like your daily routine during this Mediterranean cruise?

COLLINS: You took different courses through the Marine Corps education side of it. And while you was aboard ship you worked these different courses to advance your education and also advance your military education. So that's just how they—you go to certain classes and then you take the, uh, the exams.

PIEHLER: And what—I guess what kind of courses do you remember at the Med—what are you learning in the courses?

COLLINS: Well the first time I went on that cruise I was in the infantry. So we done most of our courses that pertained to the infantry. Like a Marine tactical unit, um, map reading, things in these—something that would help you in your, in your field. The next time I went on a little cruise I was a heavy equipment operator. And being a heavy equipment operator, then you worked on your equipment.

PIEHLER: While you were ...

COLLINS: ... while you was on there. If you had—salt air makes things rust in there. So what we would have to do is take it, scrape it, and paint it. From the time you got up to the time you went to bed you just worked on your equipment and kept it up, kept it ready to—cause on a cruise like that, if you have anything that will break out into a, uh, conflict, you're usually one of the first ones to go in ...

PIEHLER: Mm Hmm.

COLLINS: ... And you got to make sure that you keep everything up in operational condition.

PIEHLER: Now in the first cruise are you part ships, the Marine ships compliment of Marines or were you—I guess how do you fit into the ships structure? What was the name; do you remember the name of the ship you sailed with in the Mediterranean?

COLLINS: I think it was called the Swamp Fox [USS Francis Marion]. (Laughter) That was a, uh, a personnel ship.

PIEHLER: So in some ways a smaller ship.

COLLINS: No ...

PIEHLER: It was a large ...

COLLINS: ... It was a pretty good size ship, yeah. Now the next one I was on was a LSD, a landing ship dock. Now, they've got two LST's and an LSD. An LSD loads from the aft, the LST loads from the front. And we would, being with the heavy equipment outfit, we loaded from the back. That was, uh, and the living quarters was about the same, but you're treated a little bit different. Each, each rank that you have, that you go up, you're treated a little bit different.

VINCENT: How did you occupy your time when you weren't at work on the ships or asleep? What kind of things did you have to do?

COLLINS: Nothing (Laughter)

VINCENT: No one playing marbles? (laughter)

COLLINS: We, um, sit around and just shot the breeze like we're doing today. But most of the time you either was working on your MCI [Marine Corps Institute] courses or you was working on your equipment and periodically they would have movies that you could go and watch.

VINCENT: Like I said, there was some kind of ...

COLLINS: Right, recreation. And a lot of the times we played cards. I got hung up on this game called pinochle, and we played a lot of pinochle to pass the time away.

PIEHLER: I'm curious, what was your—did you expect to be in a combat situation in the early 60's? What were your thoughts at the time about what was going to happen?

COLLINS: No. I thought, you know, you would get up, you would, over a period of time, you'd make a certain rank and at the end of that, when you'd made that certain rank it'd be like a, like a civilian job. A lot of times in the, uh, while I was here in the states side, it is sort of like a civilian job. You go in at a certain time, you leave at a certain time. You have a certain amount of time for lunch and then you do your normal day work job. But then, uh, when you get into combat, that's a different side of the picture. Have you ever seen any combat?

PIEHLER: No, I never, I've not been in the military. I've only interviewed people who have been. What, um, I'm curious in terms of, what did you think of John F. Kennedy, in the early, you know ...

COLLINS: I thought he was a good man. I thought he was a good, a good president.

PIEHLER: You thought that at the time when you were ...

COLLINS: Yes. I thought he was decent. Yes. I thought Nixon was a good man. I thought he was a good president. I think we've had, we've had a lot of great men that are presidents. We've had some that was president, okay? Just like sometimes you'll have a—a great employer, and other times you have a employer, and I think we have had a lot of great men that are not afraid of making decisions. And that's what we need today, people that are not afraid to make a decision, and once they make that decision they need to stick by it, and take the responsibility of it. Yeah I think that we've had some great presidents.

PIEHLER: When did you think Vietnam was going to be your—cause you mentioned that you had sort of gotten used to a military that you had a lot of responsibility, but still there was an element, you got married, you had routines, you went, you came home.

COLLINS: You had a civilian type ...

PIEHLER: Yeah, there's an element that it's becoming more civilian-like.

COLLINS: Um, I didn't think much about Vietnam at all. I didn't—I hadn't known of anyone going to Vietnam. I went over there the first time was in 1965. It hadn't been published a whole lot. I think about the only thing you had there then was advisors. So, I wasn't really concerned about it. If you don't know anything about something, all you can do is be leery of it or don't think about it at all. Well, I did not know anything about it so I didn't even think about it. So I went to—I got orders, and our orders never read where we was going to. It says that we was going to report to Camp Pendleton for further transfer to overseas billet. So you know, you had Japan and Okinawa, and you had quite a few other an overseas billets that you could go to.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

COLLINS: So after we got done going through the, oh, probably about thirty or forty-five days of different little training in California, then that's when they come up and said, "Okay, we're getting aboard ship and we're going overseas." So on the way over there, right before we got to Hawaii, that's when they decided, "Okay, who has not got a will made, we need to make a will." And so I had not made a will. So I decided then it was time to make a will. Then they told us, "Okay you need to pack up all your civilian clothes and all of your Class A uniforms. The only thing you will keep out is your boots, your underclothes, socks, and your fatigues." It's fatigues in the Army, dungarees in the Marine corps. (Laughter) That's what we ended up keeping out and then they let us know where we was going, was in to Vietnam.

PIEHLER: So you know when you left the United States that you would all be going to Okinawa, or Korea, or ...

COLLINS: Anywhere. You had all kinds of supporting outfits out there. And me not being—the first time to Vietnam I was not in the infantry, I was a heavy equipment operator. So you know, I could have went to anywhere. Until they started making me make a will and packing up all my clothes, and only keeping out certain items, and then ...

PIEHLER: It's striking because so many who went to Vietnam went over by air, ... but you went over by ship. Once you knew where you were going and you and your fellow Marines, what did you talk about? It sounds like you were a little shocked that.

COLLINS: We—this was our first time ever going over there, so we really didn't know what to expect. We landed at Da Nang and they had like an air base there and they said, "Okay, you got this one," and they called your name out and you went to different buildings and then they'd say, "Okay, you are going here, you're going there," and you're going different places. You really did not know what to expect.

PIEHLER: I'm curious when they told you on the ship, you know, "Make out your will you're going to Vietnam," what—did they explain why you were going to Vietnam, in the sense of what we're doing, like what's this war all about?

COLLINS: No.

PIEHLER: In other words this was the details; we're going to Vietnam, make your will out, in a sense get ready for combat.

COLLINS: They really didn't tell us to get ready for combat either.

PIEHLER: They didn't even say that?

COLLINS: No. It was sort of a ... shock to you when you got off of the ship. Once you got off the ship, you went to your outfit. Well, at that time there wasn't a whole lot of ground fighting and then later on we had to go on a operation down next to Chu Lai. That's when you started seeing the operation side, that's ...

----- END OF TAPE 2: SIDE A -----

PIELER: Please continue.

COLLINS: That's when you really started seeing the, the side of the war and you started dealing with people that had been killed, that they were bringing in. You was having to take and get 'em ready and ship them back to Da Nang. You had to hold inventory on their personal effects that they had right on their body at that time, um, getting their names and filling out a little death card and then they would move them from there, and somewhere else and process them to getting them back to America. So that's when you really start saying, "Hey, this is what's coming down." That operation only lasted probably thirty days. They would take and do different operations. They would take and move a group to Khe Sanh or they would move a group to Ouang Tri, they would move a group to different little places. And you would take and be on operations anywhere from twelve days to thirty days and then you would come back. Some of 'em would go out and they would end up getting into fire fights while out on patrol. They would try to send out a squad around checking, making sure that none of them were moving in on you. I seen very little of that because of the occupational field that I was in. I seen—whenever they come—they had an operation up at Khe Sanh. There was ... ah, I don't remember what year. I think it was in 66', the first part of 66'. They was twelve Air Force and they was probably eighteen Special Forces army, and there was five Marines. And our job was to take and offload all the ammuntion they was going to be using during the operation up there. And then they had an infantry outfit, I think it was 26th Marines. They come in and they would stay up there and then go out and check see if they could find any of the enemy. You did not know who the enemy really was, cause during the day they could be working in a rice paddies and then at nighttime they'd be shooting at you,

so you really didn't know who your enemy was. But periodically you had, uh, you had, uh, outfits that went out and got hand to hand.

PIEHLER: When did someone give you an explanation of what—I mean, obviously you're given jobs, you know, you were given orders and tasks and missions to do, but did anyone ever explain to you why you were in Vietnam at that time and who the enemy is, what's this war about?

COLLINS: Uh, No.

PIEHLER: No. In many ways you are saying, "Do this, go up here."

COLLINS: "You go over here and you take this hill." Well, why do we take this hill? See in the Marine Corps it is not to ask why, it is to do or die, okay? So, that was the environment that we was taught throughout boot camp is just do, go. And that's—we didn't ask no questions. That came later.

PIEHLER: But at the time, why did you think you were here? Do have any sense, I mean, not thinking back what you know later.

COLLINS: I knew we was trying to help people to keep from being overruled by communism, but later on found out that we didn't ... accomplish anything. But as far as giving you a reason, they didn't give no reasons.

PIEHLER: Well, even the big picture, you never had, you know, a half-hour talk like, "Okay, this is where the started and this is ..." You never had any of that kind of ...

COLLINS: No, no. Matter of fact, I don't really think that anybody today—well, let me rephrase that. A lot of people know where it started, but see they had the French in there for years and years and they didn't do no good. And then they brought Americans in there and I think that when we first went in, we was just going to be their advisors, to help out the Vietnamese; to help train them to fight against the communists. And, uh, it just didn't work out that way.

PIEHLER: But they never—did you know the French had even been there in Vietnam when you got there?

COLLINS: When I got there, no. But after a few months you learned who was there and what was going on by conversations. But as far as, "Hey, we are ..."—they didn't give you a five paragraph order. They just didn't do that.

PIEHLER: I'm also—what did they tell you? Did they ever tell you what Vietnam was like? The culture you would encounter, the people, did you ever have any?

COLLINS: No.

PIEHLER: No, I mean ...

COLLINS: They didn't tell you how they lived. That was a, sort of a, a shock. But you know Vietnam had different living, uh, the way they lived, but a lot of it was still oriental ways. Their housing was sort of like a Oriental type housing. Still had the grass huts. They didn't have the concrete floors, they still had the dirt floors. They didn't have running water; they did not have electricity. You know, it was still sort of backwoods-type living, and a lot of it in Japan and even in the Philippines was backwoods living. So it was all sort of the same kind of culture.

VINCENT: While you were over there the first time, what was the story on the home front? Did you hear anything news from the home front?

COLLINS: Not until you got back. When you got back, then that's when they really let you know how they felt about the people that had went over there. It's sort of, it was a unwanted conflict. The people here did not want us there, the politicians wanted us there but the public, per say, did not want you there. And they did not—they didn't support you. Like they are doing today. See, right now we are supporting these guys. We are supporting the president, but if something isn't done before long the people ain't going to be supporting the president, cause we're losing too many men and we might get—we may be winning the war, but were losing the battles.

VINCENT: How did your wife feel about it? Did you get any letters from home? How did she feel about you being over there? What were her thoughts?

COLLINS: She didn't like it.

VINCENT: Well, I know she didn't like it.

COLLINS: She knew that that was a decision that we had made and she supported me in that decision. She knew that we had made that decision to make the military a career so she supported me. Had a lot of, a lot of lonely nights on both sides.

PIEHLER: I want to just pause for a second cause I realize that ...

(Tape Paused)

PIEHLER: Excuse that interruption. It's interesting your comment cause I, normally I try to isolate myself from the world when I interview, but I called my assistant to sort of return a diary. You made the comment to me off tape that you sort of wish you had kept a diary.

COLLINS: Of my whole military career. Places that I had been and things that I have seen. But, you know, I didn't, but I do wish that I had of, cause it would help me today.

PIEHLER: It also sounds like you wish you'd had a camera more often. Is that—you've already alluded to that.

COLLINS: Yes, I would have. There are a lot of pictures that I would have liked to have taken, but I just didn't do it. Especially in the Vietnam era, because they—Vietnam has got some beautiful countryside. I would like to go back over there and just go from Da Nang to Khe Sanh, up to Huê. I'd like to go to all those places, because they do have some beautiful countryside. I enjoyed the traveling and, uh, you know, seeing the different parts of the world.

PIEHLER: In your first tour of duty, what rank were you?

COLLINS: I was E-3. Then at the end of my second enlistment, I was a E-6. And in the Marine Corps, once you make a certain grade then you are pretty well locked there for four or five years before you make another rank, but ... when I got out I was an E-7.

PIEHLER: What, in your first tour of Vietnam, what are your most vivid memories? Does anything really stick out in terms of a vivid memory?

COLLINS: Smell.

PIEHLER: What smells were they?

COLLINS: It was just a—a hard—more like a stink, and no matter where you went over there, I don't know if it came from the rice paddies or it come from their, the way they had to do their waste. But no matter where you went over there you had a certain smell and that stood with me all the way through, a beautiful country like that to smell that way. It was a bad smell.

PIEHLER: What was your, your first tour of duty what was your closest call? Did you have any close [calls] in terms of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, in terms of an enemy attack, or other sort of, you know, just in terms of your daily ...

COLLINS: I was at Khe Sanh. I had some close encounters there. And then we went to—I left Khe Sanh and went to Huê, and that's when the uprising that came at Huê.

PIEHLER: That's in your second tour, or was that in your first tour?

COLLINS: That was in my first tour.

PIEHLER: That was in your first tour?

COLLINS: Right, also. Now, I'd seen more in the first tour than I did in the second tour.

PIEHLER: Really?

COLLINS: Yeah. I knew more about what was going on in the second tour than the first. But, uh, no I had seen more—like we went to an operation, Harvest Moon, and then we went to that, up at Khe Sanh and then we went to Huê. And then we moved from Huê to Coco Island, um, all these different places, that was all in the first tour. I was stationed out of Da Nang. Well in my second tour I went in, I went into Dong Ha and as soon as I reported in I looked at the First Sergeant and I says, “Top, I would like to know if we have any outfits that are out from, dang it, Dong Ha. And he says, “Why?” I said, “Well, I’d like to go to some of the outposts.” “Why would you want to go to these outposts?” Well, here in Dong Ha, you got all this communication. You had all kinds of different units there and every unit had an antennae sticking up. And I says, “I’d like to get out from all these pinging stakes that they’ve got up through Dong Ha. Let me go out into the bush and I’ll feel a lot safer out there.” And I do.

PIEHLER: Really? That ...

COLLINS: Have you ever heard that before?

PIEHLER: No, I should say that I have interviewed more World War II and Korean veterans. I’ve interviewed some Vietnam veterans, but that’s interesting.

COLLINS: In the first—one of the times I was over there, they would have the Vietnamese come in and they would call their artillery right in on top of them. It’s sort of like it is, what we’re doing now in Iraq, you know, they didn’t care to lose their life, as long as they are taking some of ours with them. If they could take and destroy an outfit, although they may end up losing their own, they would call in on these little radios and they would talk back and forth and say, “Hey, up two, or over to your left one,” and, “Yeah, okay, I’m sitting up at one and a half, uh, shoot it.” They was—as long as they was getting something of ours. One of them was caught; he was calling in their mortar rounds and into our POL [Petroleum, Oil, and Lubricants, our oil and our fuel and all of that, that we had, and he was sitting in it. And they ended up—they caught him, before they got in to blow it up. But, they uh, they would call it in right on top of it and ... they was taking something with them.

PIEHLER: I guess, could you give me a sense—you’ve already talked a little bit about some of your duties, but what was sort of—did you even have a daily routine, cause you describe you’re going from these different locations in Vietnam and doing a range of different things. Because at one point it sounds like you were doing some grave registration duty ...

COLLINS: You just done what, you done what had to do. I was really a, like I said, I was a heavy equipment operator. I offloaded barges that had the Agent Orange chemical on it, okay? The, uh, we would take and offload that and we had a staging area that we put it all in. I would take and operate road graders we’d take and go out on the road and we’d grade the roads. Anything that pertained to a piece of heavy equipment, we operated. Up at Khe Sanh, we had what they call a TL-16, a forklift. Well that’s what we took the ammunition off of these C-130’s and stored it. And then whenever the

operation was over then with we had to load it back up and ship it other places. And we—you done other jobs, you just didn't have a one certain thing that you done. If in the heavy equipment operating side, the engineers, you could be operating a crane today, off loading barges, and tomorrow you might be up at Khe Sanh, working on the air strip up there and the mortars coming in on it. So you did not know what you were going to be doing from day to day. Whatever comes down.

PIEHLER: So in a sense there was no typical day that first year.

COLLINS: No.

PIEHLER: Where, you know—cause a lot of military specialties I interview it sounds like, at times, frightfully boring, cause they're doing the same task for a year. You're ...

COLLINS: I was moving. And that helped. That helped me with my time, because the time went by a lot faster. It helped me with—I didn't think about home all the time. It was, uh, was being busy, helped time go by a lot faster.

PIEHLER: I'm also struck by—you didn't really know what was going on.

COLLINS: No, you don't.

PIEHLER: Did you ever like read *Star's and Stripes* or listen to Armed Forces Radio?

COLLINS: Very little.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

COLLINS: Very little. I didn't ...

PIEHLER: Any magazines from home?

COLLINS: No. I didn't get no magazines (Laughs)

PIEHLER: So at any rate, it strikes me as you had a very limited view of what was going on, I mean ...

COLLINS: Very little education about what was taking place. I know that I was there—we was there to do a certain, a certain job. We wasn't there to change their culture, but we was there to try to keep the North Vietnam from taking over their South Vietnam.

VINCENT: You said something about the Agent Orange. How did you know it was Agent Orange? What was it labeled? How much did you handle and were you ever exposed? What was that all about?

COLLINS: Yes, and I'm going through—I've got an appointment the twenty-third of, there should be an Agent Orange exam. After coming back the second time, I had a rash on both legs, calf and the thigh part and it was sort of like raw meat. And I had to go get shots to try to get it cleared up and now I'm going through the VA. I've been a—I've got a thirty percent disability, which isn't much. But since that, Agent Orange, they say some of the side effects of it is diabetes, heart condition, different cancers. I've got diabetes, I've got some coronary artery disease, and I got hypertension. And a lot of that, they say can come from the Agent Orange. I had one of my cousins that just got done having lung cancer. He just had one of his lungs taken out, um, and he's also going through the VA, but he was over there also. And the guy that he—that's what we're after, what I'm after now, is trying to proceed some of the Agent Orange things. But yeah, we handled it and we shipped it to other units for them to use. And ... no matter how careful you are with a barrel, that barrel is going to have some seepage somewheres and you'll get it on you. And, like I was saying, we had a staging area that we put it in and there was nothing grown, there was nothing green there. It was all brown. So, yeah, offloaded that a lot of times.

VINCENT: Both tours?

COLLINS: No, in the first tour.

PIEHLER: You mentioned at one point being shelled in Khe Sanh building an airstrip. How often did you have to fight as an infantryman, or did you have to fight at all, at any point?

COLLINS: As far as getting hand to hand?

PIEHLER: Yeah.

COLLINS: No, I was lucky on that.

PIEHLER: So you never had to fire a weapon in defense?

COLLINS: Well, I fired my weapon, yes. But, as far as going into a battle ...

PIEHLER: Yeah.

COLLINS: No, I didn't have to do that, I was lucky. I was one of the fortunate ones.

PIEHLER: So the time you had to fire your weapon, when was that? I mean, do you remember what circumstances ...

COLLINS: That was up in ... Coco Beach, or Coco Island up there. But that's when we had some people trying to overrun us and we had some shooting. But it wasn't a—well now see, some of the times they would hit these firebases and they would have regiments of Vietnamese attacking different firebases. And yeah, they would have a lot more action.

But, you know, that's—they seen a whole lot of action just like, uh, I got a cousin, who I just mentioned that had that lung cancer, and he had three purple hearts and so yeah. And you get these medals, but you have a lot of different side effects from the way you got those medals. And then that goes for the rest of your life. Like these people over there in Iraq that was prisoners of war, they're scarred, and they will be scared for the rest of there life. No matter what they do, life will never be the same. Just like that, uh, one officer that came back; he said that when he got back and people shooting fireworks that just really got to him because of the action that he had seen. And like he said my life will never be the same and, it's just they're young kids. I say young kids, I'm almost sixty-two now and the ones over that are over there now are the ones that are students here at the university.

PIEHLER: I'm curious. The first year you were in Vietnam, you were part of the buildup in '65, I mean, in fact, you were constructing some of that build—I mean literally the airstrip for example. Did you even think in terms of victory?

COLLINS: No, we had never lost a war.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

COLLINS: We've always won our wars. You know, WWII, Korea; we won them. We had victory, we had celebrations. Well, from what I understand, after WWII they had a big, big parades throughout the United States. I was, uh, listening to a guy who the other day talk, he said he could remember at the end of WWII that they'd run it on the radio that "The war was over! the war was over!" and he said, "Man, they had shouting in the streets." People were running up and down shouting, "The war is over! the war is over!" And during the Vietnam time, when it was over, we didn't have that.

PIEHLER: What about Korea? Do you remember the end of the Korean War?

COLLINS: That was sort of a, they had sort of like a little celebration.

PIEHLER: In Knoxville?

COLLINS: Yes.

PIEHLER: Do you remember where it was?

COLLINS: Most of it was all held downtown, okay. They would have these parades. But yeah, it was a victory with Korea. But, no, I never thought we would ever lose a war, cause we had never lost a war before.

PIEHLER: What were you creature comforts like? For example, how often would you get a shower your first tour in Vietnam?

COLLINS: Maybe once a week, sometimes you would have to go two weeks. Sometimes you would get one every night. It all depends on where you was at. If you was in the rear, around in Da Nang, then they had ... showers times and you could go in and take a shower during that time, but once you got out, if you was up in Khe Sanh or down at Chu Lai, then you might have to jump in the creek and wash clothes and all at the same time. But, you know, you do what you have to do.

PIEHLER: What about meals? What was the range of food you had and how often did you have to eat, sort of, rations?

COLLINS: Anytime that you was out on an operation you ate rations. A lot of times in the rear they would set up a mess hall and they would prepare the food and you would go through just a regular mess line. And they would feed you like that. But, no, up in—you left the rear area then you went to ...

PIEHLER: You went to rations.

COLLINS: You went to rations.

PIEHLER: What about, um, did you ever see a USO show on your first tour?

COLLINS: Yes, I seen, uh, Ann Margaret.

PIEHLER: You saw Ann Margaret the first tour?

COLLINS: I seen Ann Margaret. I seen Bob Hope. There was some more—I seen oh, she was a black woman.

PIEHLER: Ella Fitzgerald?

COLLINS: Carol—Baker? It was a long time ago. That was three that stands out. Ann Margaret and Bob Hope was the two main ones.

PIEHLER: And when you were, particularly on bases, what would you do when your task was done for the day, when your assignment was done?

COLLINS: You would go to ... go back to the barracks, work on your personal gear. Or you would take and go to the club.

PIEHLER: Mm Hmm. The enlisted man's club.

COLLINS: Right. Every base had a little club and you could go to it and get you something to drink. You could either get Cokes or beer. A lot of times over there you was issued like two beers a day and, uh ...

PIEHLER: (Laughs) It sounds like you did enjoy drinking a little bit, is that a fair?

COLLINS: Well, no, I didn't drink a whole lot.

PIEHLER: So you didn't necessarily drink those two beers every day?

COLLINS: A lot of times I would trade those beers.

PIEHLER: What would you trade them for?

COLLINS: Coca-colas, you could get you Cokes or beer either one and I a lot of times I would rather have the Coke than I would the beer.

PIEHLER: Did you smoke at the time?

COLLINS: Yes. And what we'd do, we had people that would go to the PX, post exchange, and we would give them the money and tell 'em what you wanted and they would pick it up for you and bring it back to you. We had ways of getting our stuff, getting our toilet articles, our cigarettes, and our hygiene stuff.

PIEHLER: At any of the bases you were at, were there any facilities that were air-conditioned at this point?

COLLINS: No.

PIEHLER: There was no, none of the officers—you didn't have a situation where the officers had air-conditioning or offices. It was still the Vietnam without air conditioning?

COLLINS: It was with out air conditioning, yes.

PIEHLER: You had been in the Philippines, and you had even been in the Mediterranean. What was the climate like? You mentioned the smells of Vietnam, but what was the sort of ...

COLLINS: It was hot and wet at times. It never—it didn't cold but it was—you got cold due to the temperature droppage. Like the temperature might be 106 today and at night it gets down to '65. It's still warm, but with that big of a drop you got cold and a lot of times you would have to put on a jacket.

PIEHLER: Mm Hmm. What about movies. Did you ever have access to American movies while you were over?

COLLINS: Periodically, they would show one but not very often. And that usually was in the rear and you would have to go to where their exchange was. Now, that—they call it Freedom Hill, that's where they set up a PX and a few other things and you would go in there and get your cigarettes, and they had a place where you could watch movies in the evenings, but once you got out of that location, no, you didn't have none of that. You

was too busy standing watch at nighttime and a lot of times you would stand watch, one of you would stand watch for a couple of hours, then the next would stand watch and back and forth.

PIEHLER: There was a question on the top of my head, um. Could you talk about the officers you encountered in Vietnam? And your sort of relationship to them?

COLLINS: All the officers that I served with were good guys. I don't think—I've only had one that him and I didn't get along.

PIEHLER: Was that your first tour or second?

COLLINS: No, this was way after the ...

PIEHLER: Oh this was way after Vietnam.

COLLINS: Right. But no, Vietnam, I didn't have—see your officer may be in one location and you may be in another. So, you really didn't—whenever I went into Khe Sanh up there, like I said there was only five Marines and I was the senior Marine and I was a Sergeant E-5. So, no, your officers did not go with you. They'd say, "Ok, sergeant you got yourself and four men, you go to here or you go to there," and that was it. You was the NCOIC [Non-Commissioned Officer in Charge]. But, yeah, the officers, they didn't ...

PIEHLER: Did you ever, on either tours, and this is very—did you ever encounter a journalist?

COLLINS: No.

PIEHLER: Never, even at a distance.

COLLINS: No, there was too many of. They would take and want to be out where the firebase was. And you know, they would show some film, but usually when they showed it, it was two or three months later, it wasn't when it actually happened. It's not like it is today, you know. Today they have a shootout and you can sit there and watch it on TV.

PIEHLER: No, I mean I think Vietnam—I always read what it took, even if they were trying to rush film on TV, how long it took and it took a few days. Even when they were like putting it on a plane and the whole. It was striking to me how long it took compared to today.

COLLINS: Well, see I—President Johnson, he would get on TV or on radio and say, "We are gonna increase—we are gonna speed up the mail to our servicemen in Vietnam." And I would say, "Alright, he made that comment, we won't get no mail for two weeks." (Laughter) And that's usually about how it was. If he got up there and said anything, then our mail just stopped and then you would get a dozen letters at one time. And you

would take and look at the date on when they was mailed, to see which one you opened first. And that's how a lot of us read our mail.

PIEHLER: It seems like that promise really sticks with you about Johnson. What did you—or did you even the first tour, thinking back now, not what you would later think—what did you think of Lyndon Johnson and did you even think of Robert McNamara. I mean now I know Vietnam veterans give a lot of thought to Robert, but at the time you were in Vietnam, what? For the first tour.

COLLINS: I didn't think he knew, uh, what was going on.

PIEHLER: You thought that at the time?

COLLINS: Right. But you know now, I think he might have been a pretty smart president. Cause he had that cloud over him that Vietnam war. So he had that cloud over him and I think he dealt with it pretty good.

PIEHLER: Actually, We're—I'm going to stop.

----- END OF TAPE II -----

PIEHLER: This continues an interview with Bobbie Collins on April 8th, 2004, at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, Tennessee with Kurt Piehler, and ...

VINCENT: John Vincent

PIEHLER: Did you even encounter chaplains when you were in Vietnam?

COLLINS: Yes, we, uh, they would come in and hold services periodically, and the ones that desired to go to church or go to the service had an opportunity to go and a lot of them did.

PIEHLER: Did you go?

COLLINS: Oh yes. I went several times. Anytime I had the opportunity, I went to services.

PIEHLER: And did you only encounter Protestant chaplains or did you also encounter any Catholic priests or other chaplains, that you remember?

COLLINS: Protestant mostly.

PIEHLER: Protestant mostly.

COLLINS: Cause that was how I was brought up, Baptist faith, you know, it's Protestant.

PIEHLER: You would go to the Protestant services. You wouldn't go to a Catholic service if that was the only...

COLLINS: No, cause that was—I wasn't into that service, I was more into the Protestant.

PIEHLER: I'm curious, and on any of your tours overseas, did you ever go to any church services abroad in any of the places that you visited or you were stationed at?

COLLINS: As far as their services, hmmm, I did in Okinawa.

PIEHLER: You did go to a church in Okinawa?

COLLINS: Yes. Now, as far as visiting, I went to several over in Italy, and anybody that gets over there, if they get a half a chance ought to go to some of their cathedrals, cause they are just absolutely fantastic. America doesn't have—well, in this location.

PIEHLER: Sounds like you made it to St Peter's, for example ...

COLLINS: (Laughter) You just, uh, sit in there and they have the statues of Jesus Christ and they look like they are just real. The nail scars in his hands, you could take and put your finger there and it's just, it's like it just goes in. They have got some fantastic artwork over there. Really something.

PIEHLER: It sounds like this has really left an impression on you, these cathedrals.

COLLINS: And you know its not up to, up the walls, it's over the head also. Just think about how long a person had to lay on his back and do that on the ceiling. It would take him years and, uh, I mean it's just fantastic some of the things you could see over there. It was beautiful. I enjoyed going to them cause they let me see some of the other type of architect work that was done.

PIEHLER: When did you know—how was it explained how long you would be in Vietnam? The first tour.

COLLINS: We knew that any kind of a tour like that goes for thirteen months. So we already knew that. In a regular tour duty like going to, um, Japan, or a non-hazardous, it was eighteen months so that's how we, we already knew that.

PIEHLER: So that part you knew.

COLLINS: That part we knew, yeah.

PIEHLER: During the first tour did you ever get to the point that you were literally counting the days down?

COLLINS: Always.

PIEHLER: Yeah, so you, even in the very beginning you were ...

COLLINS: Always, no matter where you're at, you count the days. You count your days when you go in and you count your days when you went out. I can't speak for everybody, but your first thirty or sixty days, you are extremely cautious about what you do, where you go, who's watching you; you just, you watch every little move. And then you go into, after about sixty days, you go into a sort of a spell that, "Hey, what happens, happens." I don't want to say you get into a "don't care" mode. You care, but you don't care either. And then about sixty days to, you know, "Hey, I'm a going home in about sixty days." Then you get into that mode like you was when you first went in. You start watching what you do, where you go, who's a watching you and everything; cause you know, "Hey, I'm getting ready to go back home now." But you mark off the days; just about everybody does.

VINCENT: So the first tour you went in as a unit. The second tour you went in as an individual or as a unit?

COLLINS: I went in as an individual each time ...

VINCENT: Each time you just filled in the spaces, okay.

COLLINS: Third shore party was a unit that I went into. They was already there.

VINCENT: Okay.

COLLINS: But they did not have the build up of personnel in '65 like they had in '68 and '69. They started bringing other—one of the first units that was brought in was a unit from Hawaii. They brought them in and they—I think that was shore party—and then they started operating out of Da Nang, started off loading the barges and the ships and bringing in the other, some more people. Yeah they ...

VINCENT: Which tour do you feel was, in general, hardest? The first or the second one?

COLLINS: I think that neither one of them was real hard. I enjoyed the—I enjoyed the time. You know, sometimes to put it—I loved it, but I hated every minute of it.
(Laughter)

PIEHLER: You're not the first veteran to say that. (Laughter)

COLLINS: I really did. I loved the way things was going over there, but I hated being away from my loved ones. Over there, the, uh—anything that happened to your loved ones here, you did not know about it for a week, or maybe two weeks. By the time you knew about it, it was already over with. And I guess that was the part I didn't like. When your kids, when your children are sick, uh, and the wife has got to take care of it, she's got to take care of it by herself, and that makes it rough. Then you get a letter, "Well, one of the daughters had pneumonia or had asthma attack," and you know there's nothing you can do about it. That's all on her shoulders. So it makes it extremely rough on the wife as well as the serviceman.

PIEHLER: How did you come home after the first tour?

COLLINS: I flew from Vietnam to Fairbanks, Alaska. Then I flew from there down to Travis Air Force Base. And I had rode the bus across the United States which was a long trip. So I thought, "Well, when I go back, I'm going to catch a flight." Well, during that time the airlines was on strike (Laughter) and I went to the airport and I said, "When can, when can I get a flight going to back to Tennessee?" And the lady says, "Well, we can put you on the manifest, but right now we're working about three days behind. I said, "Oh no, I can't handle that. Sit around here in this airport for three days." And then you may get out, and then you may not. So I says, "Well, I'll go catch me a train." So I went and got a train, or I tried to get a train. And I got down there and I think the closest I could get was St. Louis (Laughter). I said, "Don't tell me I got to go back by bus." So I had to catch a bus, come back this way, and that's a horrible trip. But the bad time of coming back, it was ... I guess in the month of December, and when we left Vietnam they left with a plane full of KIAs and they was sending them back by the plane-full.

PIEHLER: The same plane you were on?

COLLINS: No, they left and then we went right behind them.

PIEHLER: So you saw these bodies being loaded on and then your plane took off.

Collins: Right.

VINCENT: Nothing could've have been that bad after that, huh?

COLLINS: That's—and you're coming back but you think about the loved ones that's going to have to be receiving their bodies. You have a—I myself have a different look on life and on people than what I had when I first—on my first tour of Vietnam.

PIEHLER: What had changed on your outlook?

COLLINS: How short life can really be. You're here today and gone tomorrow and the, uh, I guess I never have forgot my faith and that helped me; that helped me a lot.

PIEHLER: So the faith, you didn't start to doubt it in Vietnam?

COLLINS: No, no.

PIEHLER: But you did, if I can make an observation, which is not an uncommon [one], most people when they are young, they sort of think they are immortal (Laughs). Not immortal, but, you know, it's a very, you know, but you—that tour sort of changed your view on that.

COLLINS: I seen a lot of the young ones being shipped back, Okay. Some of them was younger than what I was when I went over there.

PIEHLER: And you weren't that old so ...

COLLINS: No, I wasn't that old, no. So I knew that death could come at any time. And, uh, but yeah they—like I told him earlier today, we come by the bookstore, right next to the bookstore, and I said, “You see that? That is the kids that are fighting our wars overseas today.” Eighteen, nineteen, twenty year olds. Our military people are so young that some of them can't even vote and they're being shipped back in a coffin. And I really think that's horrible. If we're going to fight a war, we need to go ahead and fight it, and get it over with. I hope I hadn't bored you ...

PIEHLER: No, no, no. Well, I want to ask about homecoming. What was your homecoming like? Did you come back to work? Where was your wife, in Knoxville? And where was she living?

COLLINS: She was living with her mother. And she met me and my parents didn't like it.

PIEHLER: Your parents didn't ...

COLLINS: They wasn't there, she was. I retired out of the Marine Corps in December of '79. I—matter a fact it was December the 19th, I think it was. I come back to Tennessee here and I was—got here on the 20th, and we was fixing to have Christmas and I went over there and seen my mother and daddy, and the next day they says, “Hey, we're going to go to California.” They wouldn't even spend the first Christmas with me. They left.

PIEHLER: Your parents left to go to California?

COLLINS: Left to go to California. So I did not have a,—a good childhood with my folks.

PIEHLER: And it didn't, it sounds like it didn't get better with time. Yeah, I mean it didn't ...

COLLINS: It didn't stop me.

PIEHLER: Yeah, but yeah ...

COLLINS: And I didn't ponder on it.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

COLLINS: I did not let it drag me down. And ...

PIEHLER: Which is—it strikes me as it must have been hard at times because, this is, you know, this is hard for people to deal with, you know, with parents. I mean, it's not.

COLLINS: I just knew what I had been through and I just knew that my parents, or I mean my kids, would not ever have to go through it. Yeah, it was—my parents are the reason why, or one of the reasons why, I chose to go in the service at an early age.

PIEHLER: I'm curious, how long were you in Knoxville before you had to report to your next duty assignment? Were you here for thirty days?

COLLINS: Usually we had thirty, but I usually ended up taking about twenty. Going back, checking in and saving some of my time.

PIEHLER: People in Knoxville, after that first tour of duty, how many knew, how many knew you had been in Vietnam and did anyone—what was that sort of first homecoming like from Vietnam?

COLLINS: It was a pleasant, but it was just a close family gathering up, no big party, none of that. The people at church, they knew that I had got back. A matter of fact I was—had a guy, by the name of Willie Dail, at the church and he had just left to go to Vietnam. And his mother, Catherine, she met me down on the lower side, which would be the west side of the church, and she said, "Gene," she says, "Billy has just left to go to Vietnam. Is he coming back?" I said, "Catherine, if he says that he's coming back, chances are he's goin' make it. But if he ever goes, "Well, this is it, I ain't coming back, I'm never coming back, chances are he ain't gonna live." And she said, "Well, he's saying he'll never come back." He did not come back. I think he was gone about four months. So yeah, there's certain people that knew that I had went over there and there's certain people now that knows that I was there. And, matter of fact, the our preacher is a strong supporter of the military. And our, uh, matter of fact, his brother got killed in World War II and he says, you know, that is a, a scene that he will never forget. Whenever they come and told his mother that his brother had got killed. He said it was just a, said she screamed, she cried, she screamed, she cried. Something that's hard to get over, if, if you ever get over it. And I don't think some people ever get over it.

PIEHLER: And then after sort of your homecoming, what happened to you next? Where did the Marine Corps send you?

COLLINS: I went to Albany, Georgia, and I became a civilian cafeteria manager.

PIEHLER: Really?

COLLINS: (Laughing) Yeah. Yes. I ... had a big civilian cafeteria that supplied dinner to the whole Marine Corps supply base. They fixed breakfast and dinner, and in the evening we had snack foods, such as pizza, and ham and cheese sandwiches, things of that nature. And had eleven different activities; had an activity at the golf course, ... one drive-in theater, one indoor theater, the main building had a little snack bar. We had ... I served it up.

PIEHLER: And you had civilians under you. You were the only military...

COLLINS: They had three of us.

PIEHLER: Three military, and the rest ...

COLLINS: Three military.

PIEHLER: So you had a non-military setting. You can't, people, you can't literally order people around like you used to.

COLLINS: Uh, no you could tell them what to do ...

PIEHLER: Yeah, but ...

COLLINS: It's a different aspect ...

PIEHLER: You can't put someone in the brig, yeah, like you could ... (Laughter)

COLLINS: Right. And then my next trip—when I left there, I went right back to Vietnam again. In the Marine Corps you're never—you may have different jobs, but you always come back to, uh, you are an infantryman.

PIEHLER: And I'm curious, how did you go over to Vietnam the second time?

COLLINS: I flew. Flew that time and landed down in Da Nang, and then I had to catch a puddle hopper up to Dong Ha. And got up to Dong Ha, I knew where I was going then, going to eleventh engineers, and whenever—that's when I asked the first sergeant, I said, "First Sergeant, do have any places other than here to go to?" And he said, "Yeah, we got a ... That was where we stored a lot of the ammunition that was going out to the other people. We had choppers that come in, we loaded it up, and then we transported it out to the different fire bases. So I said, "I'll go. I'll take it." He said, "Okay," so I went out there. It was a lot easier, we didn't have the, we didn't have the facilities like they had at Dong Ha. We didn't have the showers every day. We didn't have the PXs but you knew

where you was at and you knew you always had to wear your flak jacket and you always had to wear your ...

PIEHLER: Helmet.

COLLINS: ... because you never knew what would happen. And we got hit up there and it destroyed about ninety percent of our heavy equipment and about forty-five percent of our motor transport, so. But it wasn't the Vietnamese that done it, it was the Army.

PIEHLER: The regulars?

COLLINS: The Army blew us up.

VINCENT: The Vietnamese army?

COLLINS: No.

VINCENT: Oh, friendly fire?

COLLINS: US Army.

PIEHLER: Oh, this is a major incident of friendly fire?

COLLINS: (Laughing) Yes.

PIEHLER: What happened? I mean, you kind of just throw that out ... (laughing)

VINCENT: Oops.

COLLINS: No, they got the wrong co-ordinance.

PIEHLER: Literally.

COLLINS: Yes.

PIEHLER: Not even close.

COLLINS: (laughing) No. And the 1-5-5 come in on top of our heavy equipment compound. It just wiped out about ninety percent of our equipment and it destroyed a road grader, it destroyed an MRS-100 [Tractor], it destroyed a crane, uh, it destroyed several motor transports. And we got about four shells before they ever stopped it.

PIEHLER: Did anyone ever get wounded or killed?

COLLINS: No.

PIEHLER: Oh, that's really—I mean ...

COLLINS: All that—the only thing that—one thing that happened whenever I was over there we always tried to make our living quarters as pleasant as we could. And so I had made me a, this other staff sergeant and myself made us a two man barracks. And we lived in it. And so I decided that I was going to make me a little porch and when I made the porch, that beach matting is slick, and so when those 1-5-5's started coming in, I grabbed all my stuff, my flak jacket, helmet, and cartridge belt. And I put my feet in my shower shoes, you know, the little flip flops and when I went out the door, I hit that beach matting, and it was slick, and so, "Pishooo!" (Laughing), my feet and my head passed each other about waist high (Laughter) and so there went everything. So when I finally made it to the bunker the only I had was my supper and they said, "Where's your, where's the rest of your gear." and I said, "Laying outside."

PIEHLER: Was that, that sounds like that was one of your close calls in the second tour? Is that, in terms of closest of the fire or did you have other close ...

COLLINS: No, we had other, uh, other close incidents. We was cleaning a minefield and we blew the tracks off of five or six bulldozers when we hit that mine. We—one guy we had the, uh, the bulldozer and when that thing—when the mine went off it blew him out of the seat about, oh, I'd say about twenty-five, thirty feet up. And when he come down he landed on his feet and he fell back and he laid right back up against the bulldozer blade. And the bulldozer had stopped, but he laid right up against it and he was just covered with that black powder, but he didn't get hurt. The Lord was with me. He took care of me and I give Him the praises of all that I had been in and some of the things that would have been there and I'm able to talk about it. And what's best of all, what little bit of mind I have, I could've lost over there. Cause you look around, you see a lot of your veterans that has got some problems and they've got a lot of mental problems. I guess you probably, you may have seen that with other Vietnam veterans.

PIEHLER: I have not with Vietnam veterans because I have not interviewed as many, but I have seen with World War II veterans. It's striking to me how many of them are still affected by the war. I mean it's, it's very striking when I first started. I'm now more used to it and I understand it better. What was the differences—I'm curious, because you did get back to the states and Vietnam had become quite a contentious issue while you were in the states and when you go over. What was your sense of the war going back to Vietnam? ...

COLLINS: Well, see, in there you didn't do a lot of questioning. You knew that, that was your job.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

Collins: And that one of these days you might have to go.

PIEHLER: Mm Hmm.

COLLINS: And so when the orders come down, you take the orders and you go. Just like this man right here. When his orders comes down, you're gone. You ... don't sit around and question it, you just go. And that's just the way it was. We knew, the second time I went over I knew more of what I was getting into than I did the first. But, no, I—you learn a lot. You learn how to, a lot of times you learn how to grow up.

PIEHLER: What did you learn from the first tour that you sort of applied to the second tour? What were the concrete things you sort of ...

COLLINS: Keep your ears open, keep your eyes open, and watch what you say. Because it just—you didn't know what to say. Or you knew what you were trying to say and hope that they didn't take it wrong.

PIEHLER: Who are they? Who is they?

COLLINS: Anybody in a combat, in a combat, uh, situation. If you make too many people angry, and you could get wounded from the backside as well as the front side, okay. So you didn't, you didn't—you did not make too many people mad at you. You try to keep peace in the family. And when you get into a combat situation, you get to be family. It's just like those—how many are there? Six or seven POWs that came back? Got that one officer, got that one girl, that one black girl that had her ankles crushed. You had that other sergeant, you had, I think there was about six or seven, and you become a family. And just like he said, I got to where I worried about what they was doing to them and that's just the way, that's the way you become in a war zone.

PIEHLER: So were you—it sounds like you were close to the men in your second tour that you served with. Is that?

COLLINS: I tried to be.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

COLLINS: I tried to be. I tried to be close in the first one. I always treated—I always tried to treat others the way I'd like for them to treat me and it's always worked well for me.

PIEHLER: How many of the Marines, particularly as a sergeant on both tours, how many were draftees or four, you know, four years and how many were like you, career? Cause in some ways you are expressing the career attitude, "I'm just going to go where they tell me, it's not my job to think about it because I'm in here, I'm a lifer."

COLLINS: You have, I'd probably say about ten percent.

PIEHLER: Were like you.

COLLINS: Yeah, about ten percent.

PIEHLER: And could you tell them, like, when you—how easy it ...

COLLINS: Not the first four years.

PIEHLER: Yeah, but the second ...

COLLINS: Once they re-enlisted, then they pretty well, you pretty well knew, hey, they're going to be here for awhile.

PIEHLER: Yeah. So the ones that were ...

COLLINS: The—and the attitude, yeah, you could tell some of 'em was, uh, not belligerent, but they just didn't have the attitude as some of us had that was going to be there. They would try to—instead of doing the job, it would take twenty minutes to do it but they'd take thirty minutes trying to get out of it, okay (Laughter). That's what you'd run into. But you knew that they weren't going to last; they was going to get out, cause they tried to fight it too much.

PIEHLER: Did you in your second base have more of a routine than your first base. Cause you said the first tour there was no such thing as routine. What about the second base?

COLLINS: No. There's no routine. You would—one day I would be loading a helicopter up, the next day I might be down working, putting a berm in the ammo bunkers. Yeah, no; you didn't have no routine, you just done what—the next day you might be out making a road, cutting a road, and the next day you might be working at the air strip. There was no just, you go in and you knew tomorrow you're going to go up here and work it the same way as you did that day, you just whatever.

PIEHLER: Did you ever get any R and R on either tours where you got to Australia or any you know, Hong Kong or any ...

COLLINS: I got to Okinawa.

PIEHLER: You got to Okinawa, that was your first or second?

COLLINS: That was my first tour.

PIEHLER: First tour.

COLLINS: And then I went to—pulled three days of R and R in Okinawa and then went back to Vietnam and stayed. And then my second time they pulled the outfit out after

about nine months and we went to Okinawa. And then went from Okinawa to Mount Fuji, Japan.

PIEHLER: Ahh.

COLLINS: And we were stationed right down at the base of Mount Fuji. That's the reason why I said I wished that I had taken a camera with me more places, because—and kept a diary. But you know when you're young, you don't think about all this. So, young man. (Looks at Vincent)

PIEHLER: I hope to get some emails from him overseas during his independent study without portraying anything, you know, that A) gets you in trouble, or B) that shouldn't be let out you but I hope ...

VINCENT: I won't pull a Geraldo.

PIEHLER: Yeah, but in terms of some of your general impressions that in some ways the military doesn't care, but are useful to have. Even though it's a good injunction cause I remember Jake White, who, he became very conscious that maybe I should keep a diary or record some of this. Although I have to remind Jake of that.

COLLINS: Yeah, but, uh, if you can jot down.

VINCENT: I wish I would have the first time I went to Desert Storm.

COLLINS: Yeah, see even like I was. Maybe you're getting, sort of a insight before I ever got the insight, okay? You're going through all of this and it's giving you some pointers of some of the things you might want to take into consideration. Other than just being for yourself, uh, your kids as you go through your life and they say, "Hey daddy, what did you do?" "Well, come here son, let me show you." And you break out your little album and you go through it. "Here's where your poppa was, or here's where your grandfather was." And that makes an impression on a little one.

PIEHLER: Because you bring it up, it sounds like you have talked to your kids about your experiences. You were not like your father in terms of your experiences in the war. Is that correct, or?

Collins: Right, I have talked to them.

PIEHLER: Yeah. They don't have to guess completely what you ...

COLLINS: No. And the relationships that I have with my kids are a lot different from what I had with my father. Um, how do I want to put it? And not sound like I'm—uh, like Athaleen [Collins's Wife] would say, "Kids, listen, don't judge your husband by your daddy. Cause you ain't going to find many like him." And I didn't say that to be bragging. You don't judge him, and you know, be as close and cherish. You married?

PIEHLER: Uh huh.

COLLINS: Got any little ones?

PIEHLER: No, no.

COLLINS: If you ever have any cherish each moment and love your wife. My wife right now is bedfast. And it's like I've been telling a lot of men, "When you go home at night, when you go home at night," go in and say, "Honey, I want to hug you twice tonight." Okay? Cause once they get to where you can't, then that's when you miss it. Okay. So take and hug 'em, hug 'em twice.

PIEHLER: I want to go back to Vietnam a little bit—actually I need to take a ...

(Tape Paused)

PIEHLER: We took a little break. I wanted to ask you, did you ever—what kind of contact did you have with South Vietnamese regulars? South Vietnamese military, with either tour of duty?

COLLINS: As far as their soldiers, I had very little contact with them.

PIEHLER: Mm Hmm. You never did a joint mission with them or ...

COLLINS: Well, I was involved with the joint mission but as far as being hand to hand with them, no. I was more of the, being in the engineer side of it, I was more with receiving the people that had been messed up. When I say messed up, I mean, you know, killed or got something blowed off or injured like that. But as far as being with the—the nearest I guess I ever came to being with a Vietnam regular was at Khe Sanh. Because at Khe Sanh they had a compound that—I think there was probably about four hundred ARVNs in that compound. And when we went in, that sergeant major, every compound that the Army had, they always had a sergeant major and a captain over it. And the sergeant major says, the sergeant says, "They got about four hundred ARVNs," that was Vietnam regulars, "And about half of them are Vietcong sympathizers." So, he said, "When you go to bed to sleep, take and sleep with one eye open and sleep with your pistol on your chest. I thought, "Well, okay." But that was probably closest. Now, first time I went in, or whenever I went in up there, they would take and, we had one fence and then on the outside of the fence, we had the claymore mines that we had put in, and they would come in and twist them around, and then when you shoot them off they blast back at us, so it didn't take us long to figure it out, we need another fence. So we put in another fence and put those mines in between ...

PIEHLER: In the two fences.

COLLINS: ... two fences, right.

-----END OF TAPE 3: SIDE A -----

COLLINS: Like I said, it did not take us long to figure that out. And, now, it's—I spent about sixty days up there. But as far as working hand to hand with them, I didn't work hand to hand with them..

PIEHLER: What about the contact—you mentioned briefly contact with civilians. What kinds of contacts would you have with Vietnamese civilians?

COLLINS: With people that's working aboard the bases, doing your clothes or fixing, uh, working in the mess hall, um, helping interview Vietnamese that you might find and bring in. You would talk with them, but that would be about it; didn't do a whole lot of communication with the Vietnamese. Now your line companies, now they would take and have what they call a Kit Carson Raider. He would go out with these different units and they may be three or four of them go with one battalion of Marines and they would take and interview the prisoners of war and either send them on back or let them go. That was about the extent of it.

PIEHLER: What about the other allies like Australians or South Koreans? Did you ever encounter any?

COLLINS: No.

PIEHLER: Neither tour?

COLLINS: No, never did. They—we was sort of broke down into certain general areas. Like Australia may have up at the DMZ at a certain time. And then they would take and pull them out and then send another group of ours up there. But as far as both being up there together, I never seen it. They always had one or the other. You know, back in World War II I think they had the Australians and the Americans fighting side by side. Well, over there they didn't have that. They also had some, from what I understand, they had some Turks over there and they wasn't side by side either.

PIEHLER: What—the second tour of duty, were you more aware of the home front than the first?

COLLINS: The home front over there?

PIEHLER: No, the home front here. I mean where did you ...

COLLINS: Oh, the home front here. I knew that the Vietnam War was an unpopular war because of the news and because of the way that people were being treated when they come back from over there. My first trip over there and come back, they, uh, they would call us names, uh, baby killers ...

PIEHLER: Now this is 1966.

COLLINS: Right.

PIEHLER: Now you flew into Travis Air Force Base though. Where were you called a baby killer?

COLLINS: See once you get there you had to go to town to get to ...

PIEHLER: Which town?

COLLINS: Closest to LA.

PIEHLER: So it's in LA?

COLLINS: Right. And California is ... another world itself too. But, uh, ... (Laughter)

PIEHLER: But I'm curious, but when you got to Knoxville ...

COLLINS: Knoxville, no.

PIEHLER: No.

COLLINS: Knoxville was pretty well laid back. Um, they, uh, see you don't get criticized if you stay with the people that knows you. And that's what I've just about done throughout my life. They say, do you go out and witness to people? Uh, I do, but most of my witnessing is done around the church, that's where I'm at. Going home, I don't get out. I bet I hadn't been over at your momma's, just very few times. (To Vincent)

VINCENT: You helped her fix that door.

COLLINS: Yeah, but you know, I just don't, uh, I just don't—I grew up in my own little shell, so we just—that's the way I was over there. I pretty well stayed in a little group and whenever we come back to the States, I would go from point A to point B, usually we traveled in a little group, so we didn't have to put up with that.

PIEHLER: Now what about the second, cause you mentioned the first homecoming being called names, what about the second homecoming? Where did you land?

COLLINS: Well, we landed at Travis also.

PIEHLER: Again, Travis?

COLLINS: Right.

PIEHLER: And again were you greeted by protesters when you left the base?

COLLINS: Some.

PIEHLER: Some.

COLLINS: Right. But I guess it was probably more the first time ...

PIEHLER: More the first time.

COLLINS: Right. But we would just go on to the—that time I was able to fly back, so we just went to the airport and you get some protesting there too, but once you got inside the terminal you stayed inside the terminal, you didn't have to fool with it no more, and just ignored it. A lot of times you just ignored the protesting.

PIEHLER: What was—your second homecoming, what was that like? Cause you didn't have to take the bus and you again came back to Knoxville in the end?

COLLINS: Right. I came back here and the only ones that really met me at the airport was my wife and the kids.

PIEHLER: And again, your parents didn't come out?

COLLINS: No.

PIEHLER: Did your parents ever write to you when you were in the service?

COLLINS: I never got a letter from my daddy, not one.

PIEHLER: What about your mother?

COLLINS: I got, uh, maybe six or seven letters. I just didn't get a lot of, a lot of mail. Like I said, my family was sort of odd and we just didn't, we just didn't communicate.

PIEHLER: Yeah. And after your second tour of duty, what happened next? Where did the Marines—after your thirty day leave where did you ...

COLLINS: I went to Camp Lejeune and I stayed there til—well, I ended up going back to Viet, uh, Okinawa. I pulled another tour in Okinawa.

PIEHLER: What year was your tour in Okinawa?

COLLINS: '70—'75?

PIEHLER: So as you were getting closer to your twenty years.

COLLINS: Right. Until then I come back in probably the, probably '74, '75 that I was over there in Okinawa, then I came back to Camp Lejeune and that's where I spent the rest of my time.

PIEHLER: One general question I want to ask about the '70s. In '73 the Army, the Armed Forces, went to an all-volunteer force. How did that change the Marines, from your sense of that?

COLLINS: The Marines didn't have too many draftees anyway.

PIEHLER: Mm Hmm. So you didn't think it was a major change.

COLLINS: No. No it wasn't a—not with the Marine Corps.

PIEHLER: I've also have read, I mean this was written about the—I even remember reading articles about this. The Marines were pretty adamant that they weren't going to change in the '70s. They were not going to bend like the Army and you could see it in some of the recruiting that the Army would do, or the Navy, or the Air Force. What was your impression of the Marines in the '70s and how, what was the same, how were the Marines the same as they were in 1959 and how had they changed in the '70s. What was the change and what was the continuity?

COLLINS: Well, during the '70s when the big drug thing come out; the marijuana. And back in the '50s, or '60s, if you caught somebody taking something you rushed him in to be court-martialed. He's either in the brig or he was gone.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

COLLINS: It sort of got to where if you caught somebody smoking dope, you had to make sure that the cigarette was in his hand, and he had in inhaled, sucked it in and hadn't exhaled yet (Laughter). It got to where you just couldn't do anything to them.

PIEHLER: So the drug use did go up, even in the Marine Corps?

COLLINS: Oh yes, it sure did. And you couldn't, uh, you couldn't fight it. Had too many—they just wouldn't do nothing about it.

PIEHLER: Was this even in Vietnam that you saw the drug use go up, or was it more just ...

COLLINS: The—oh, in Vietnam it wasn't the—I think that's where some of it started.

PIEHLER: Yeah. But it really, it crossed over to the states?

COLLINS: Right. They—over there though it was, uh, opium. See, that was the big thing over there. And they would take that because of the pressure and the, what they was

going through in these firefights, and they would take that opium and get to where they was on a buzz.

VINCENT: Keep 'em numb.

COLLINS: Yeah, their brain. And a lot of 'em when they come back, their brain was numb, so. But yeah, you could see the ... difference in the early '60s and the late '60s, and early '70s. You could see the difference in the—and then when McNamara ... (Cell phone ringing)

(Tape Paused)

PIEHLER: I don't want to keep you too much longer, but let me—you mentioned the drug use. Is there any other changes in the Marine Corps that you saw of the '70s? And also, what had stayed the same about the Marines?

COLLINS: Well, a lot of—there was a lot of changes. One was the disciplinary. You didn't have the ... discipline that you had before. It started getting lax. You didn't have the authority that you had years ago. As an E-7, when I first went in, if he, if he told you to do something, you done it. But in the latter '70s it got to where you didn't tell nobody nothing.

PIEHLER: Even in the Marines?

COLLINS: Yeah, even in the Marines. You had to just about ask them to do it. And that's one of the reasons why I got out. I would hate to have to go through a combat situation as a E-7 and to tell a E-1 or E-2 to do something and he going to stand there and argue with you. So I said, "I just can't, I don't think I can deal with this anymore." So I give it up. But I stayed; I did stay my 20 years.

PIEHLER: Yeah, no. I mean you ...

COLLINS: I stayed 20 years, 6 months and 21 days.

VINCENT: (laughter) You got them counted.

PIEHLER: You did the calendar, the counting.

COLLINS: And I did the marking off. (Laughing)

PIEHLER: You did, you would mark a calendar. (Laughing)

COLLINS: Yes I would. So, yes.

PIEHLER: Did you use the GI Bill at all?

COLLINS: I used the GI Bill for a little bit because I went to State Tech and took a couple of courses. And then I used the GI Bill on getting my home.

PIEHLER: Was that the first house you ever owned?

COLLINS: No, it wasn't the first. I had bought one down in Jacksonville, but I didn't ...

PIEHLER: You didn't hang on.

COLLINS: I didn't, no, I did not hang on to it and I didn't go through the GI Bill, I just took over the payments for the mortgage for a guy. And so then I was able to use my GI Bill here to get the house.

PIEHLER: What courses did you take at Tech?

COLLINS: I took some machine shop and some shoe repair. I learned enough about shoe repair to be dangerous. (Laughter)

PIEHLER: And the home you bought on the GI Bill is that still the home you live in today?

COLLINS: Yes. Yes sir.

PIEHLER: And you mentioned during the interview about Agent Orange and going to the VA, how—maybe could you describe your relationship with the VA. I'll give it in the most general terms.

COLLINS: You're dealing with the government, and anytime you're dealing with the government, it's slow. I'm trying to get an increase in disability, due to the Agent Orange, due to the heart condition, the diabetes. So, yeah, I turned my paperwork in August, and I've got another interview with them the 23rd of this month. The Agent Orange that I got on my legs has left me with scars on them. So, yeah, that's ...

PIEHLER: I know that some Vietnam veterans have been very critical of the Agent Orange and how the government handled, the VA and others handled the Agent Orange. What's your own personal experience with that?

COLLINS: I think that—my own personal feelings is that they don't do enough for the veterans that had been put in a situation that causes problems for them. They prolong it, just like I said to the lady down at the DAV. I says, "Are they waiting on me to die before they act on this, so they don't have to do anything?" That's just about the way it seems. They wait, they keep on postponing things until they figure, "Well, he's just about dead, so now we won't have to really worry about him." So that—I don't think that the VA is as—I don't think they look at the military veteran as well, as well as they should. They need to take care of them more better.

VINCENT: Are you member of any veteran groups?

COLLINS: No.

VINCENT: No.

COLLINS: No.

PIEHLER: Have you stayed in touch with any of the Marines you served with? Particularly in Vietnam?

COLLINS: One. A guy by the name of Dale Hubbard, and he's out of Louisiana. Now I've stayed with three or four. One of 'em was a civilian. And we usually try to meet about once every two years. It was four families that lived in Jacksonville and we all lived next door to each other. And every other year, we usually meet to spend a week together and ...

PIEHLER: And where did you usually meet, where was that?

COLLINS: That was back in '70—about '73. One of them is from, one couple is from Pennsylvania, one couple is from North Carolina, and one couple is from Louisiana. So we've got that ...

PIEHLER: And Dale Hubbard is one of those?

COLLINS: In Louisiana.

PIEHLER: Yeah.

COLLINS: Yeah.

PIEHLER: So that bond, it sounds like a very solid ...

COLLINS: It is. And since then my wife has had all of her problems. Dale's wife has had cancer. The guy in North Carolina, he's had cancer, and the one in Pennsylvania, he's got cancer today. So we're gonna to try to get together again this year, but we got a feeling it might be our last time.

PIEHLER: I guess—what movie or novel best reflects your war? Is there—I mean there have been a lot of Vietnam war films, I don't know how many you've seen but have you seen any films that, if you've seen some films, what film would you say reflects your experience or do any of them reflect your war?

COLLINS: I would say that the movie about David Jensen and John Wayne, and it is about a group of Army guys, *The Green Berets*.

PIEHLER: That's the closest to your, to your war?

COLLINS: Other than *Full Metal Jacket*.

PIEHLER: So you felt *Full Metal Jacket*—it's very interesting cause I really liked that film and I've been wondering what veterans think of that, cause I thought that they had captured a lot in that film.

COLLINS: The *Full Metal Jacket* started from the very beginning, but it was all done as a unit.

PIEHLER: Yeah, which is not ...

COLLINS: It's not, no, they don't do that. But they carried that unit from boot camp, all the way through the boot camp phase, into the Vietnam phase. It was all the same unit all the way through and ...

PIEHLER: But you think that particularly—I thought the movie was very interesting in terms, that it sounds like you can relate to the scenes about boot camp. Is that, is that—I think that's one of the things I think that make it very effective. You know, I just thought—that's very interesting.

COLLINS: Yes, you can relate to that.

PIEHLER: Yeah I was wondering how—I mean they used an actual drill sergeant, so I mean, I don't think he had to do a lot of acting at times (laughter).

COLLINS: Now they—going through there, they do have this way of waking you up by throwing a garbage can down the middle of the barracks. And when I went through they had—it was a two-story barracks and I was on the bottom floor and we had these steel posts that went up in the middle of the squad bay. And they would take these big old, like a thirty-five or forty gallon trash can, and they would—and it was aluminum, and they would throw it down the middle of the squad bay. And they would be—start hollering, “Get up! get up! get up! get up!” And so you would have to jump up to get in front of your rack. But yeah, *Full Metal Jacket*, they showed some of that. Now they had another one that come out, Clint Eastwood, and what was it, um ...

VINCENT: *Heartbreak Ridge*?

PIEHLER: *Heartbreak Ridge*.

COLLINS: Yeah, I did not, that did not impress me. It was too much his side, okay. Getting out fighting with his superior officers, no, you don't do that. Um, I just, I wouldn't give you a quarter for it. I mean, I didn't appreciate that. Now, World War II movies; was it *Tora, Tora, Tora*? When that Japanese—when they bombed Pearl Harbor. You have just woke the sleeping giant.

PIEHLER: So that's the movie it sounds like you're impressed with?

COLLINS: That one and I'm also impressed with the—*To Hell and Back*.

PIEHLER: Audie Murphy.

COLLINS: Audie Murphy.

PIEHLER: Now did you see that after you were in the service or before? Did you see that in the 1950's, do you remember?

COLLINS: No, it was after I had ...

PIEHLER: After you had—much later after it's original release.

COLLINS: Right. Now that impressed me. And after going through the military side of it, the awards that he received, they don't usually live to get. Most of your Medal of Honors are posthumously.

PIEHLER: Yeah, they ...

COLLINS: Although I have been with—there was one that had one in the sixth Marines when I was there. And there's one that received a Medal of Honor in Vietnam that was on the same flight back that I was on. All of us got on, then this full bird Colonel got on, and then this—he was a gunnery sergeant, he got on. They escorted him to his seat and when he got off, they had a staff car pull up, two MPs went in, escorted that gunny off and then they came back and got that Colonel. But that gunny was the one that they took off first, and when they come back in, they says, "Colonel, that gunny would like to know if you'd like to accompany him." So, yeah, that was the one that I—I think I—a Medal of Honor, you can not give them enough praise.

PIEHLER: What did you do after—you mentioned taking some courses, what did you do for a living after you got—once you sort of got settled in Knoxville?

Collins: I started working at, uh, with my father.

PIEHLER: And what was that like, because you never had been particularly close?

COLLINS: We still wasn't close. (Laughter) He had ... the business and I was wanting to carry on the family business. And most—I worked with it for eleven years. And I guess, I would take and do jobs, and he just didn't—he was always fussing about it. So after about eleven years I finally told him, "Okay, it ain't worth it. Now you can—it's your business, you take it. I'm gone." So then I—I went to work at a trucking outfit being a dispatcher, and it didn't take me long to realize that was not my calling. If

you've ever dealt with truckers, (Laughter) that was definitely not my calling. So I ended up—I went to work at a church.

PIEHLER: Well, the church, the North Knoxville Baptist.

COLLINS: The North Knoxville Baptist Church. And I have been the custodian there for the last twelve years. And I was goin' to retire the 6th of March and so whenever, oh, I guess it was about two weeks before I was going to retire, the preacher called me in and he said, "Gene, sit down here, cause I want to talk to you." I said, "Alright." He says, "When are you going to sign up for Social Security?" I said, "Oh, I don't know, probably about the last of April, May." He says, "Well, when you going to start drawing your Social Security?" I said, "Oh, probably around August." He said, "Well, what are you going to do from March until August? I said, "I don't know, not a whole lot. Just take care of my wife." He said, "Well, let me ask you something," he says, "Why don't you hang around here?" I said, "Well, I've already told everybody I'm going to retire." He says, "Well you know, you can change your mind," he said, "Why don't you change your mind?" I said, "Preacher, I don't know." He says, "Think about it. All I'm asking, think about it." I says, "Well, what about the personnel? I already gave them my intent." He says, "Don't worry about personnel, I'll take care of personnel. Think about it." I said, "Well okay." So after about two weeks I went back to him and I said, "Preacher, I'll go ahead and I'll stay." He said, "Okay, I'll go talk to personnel." About a week after, that personnel says, the chairman of personnel, come up to me and says, "Gene, I want to tell you something. Preacher talked to me. You can stay here as long as you want to stay. You've got a job."

PIEHLER: So you're continuing to work?

COLLINS: I've continued to work.

PIEHLER: One thing I should put on the record because during a break, we shouldn't have had all that Coke, we both have been running—you observed these blinds. You did a lot of work putting up blinds at the University ...

COLLINS: Yes, whenever I worked at—a guy by the name of Bob Campbell, and then there was another Bob, I don't remember what his name was. I think he worked in procurement and we done a lot of work for the University of Tennessee, fixing their venetian blinds, making the pads for the football stadium, making awnings for the University, making the pads for the posts in the arena; I've done a lot of their upholstering. Yeah, we, uh, I enjoyed working with this university.

PIEHLER: Yeah, and you even remember you had a role in building the ...

COLLINS: The camera ...

PIEHLER: The camera for the ...

COLLINS: ... on the—back in the, yeah, back in the '80s they had a pipe stand up on the top of the stadium at the north end. And in bad weather—they cameras up there—they needed to cover them up. So I had the job of making the covers to cover up those cameras for the University of Tennessee. Yes, sir.

PIEHLER: Now you may well have done these blinds, because these have been here for a while. I would not be surprised, I think they haven't been changed in at least ...

COLLINS: Well, we made them from—we bought the slat material, we bought the webbing, and we bought the head, just in long pieces. And we used to have to cut it to however length we needed. Yeah, we made a lot of venetian blinds for UT and a lot of the canvas work for UT.

PIEHLER: And I guess, one thing I should, I should end on asking a little bit about your family, or your daughters. Do they live in Knoxville?

COLLINS: They live in Knoxville. I've got—my oldest went through a nursing course, she's on disability now, but she had graduated from high school and had her, uh, they call it, CNA, and then (cell phone ringing).

PIEHLER: (Laughing) That's okay, no, no, no. As I said, I really won't keep you much longer. So you mentioned your one daughter was a nurse for a while.

COLLINS: She worked as a nursing assistant at St Mary's and she also worked at Serene Manor, a nursing home. And then my other one, she took cosmetology at Rule, not Rule, Fulton. And then she took up working for Sally's. And now she is the general manager of Sally's out on the Clinton Highway, and she is the star manager trainer. She trains all of their managers for this district here. So they've done alright for themselves.

PIEHLER: And are they both married?

COLLINS: Both of them are married. Arleen has got two kids. April, which is my pride and joy, she was premature, she was a twin, her twin passed away after four and a half years. She has some CP in her left side that affected her hand and her foot. Her first thirty days she probably had two or three blood transfusions. Her sister that passed away had, in about two months, she had twelve or thirteen blood transfusions. She had five or six major surgeries, because her blood—when a baby is born, from what I understand, their blood is going one way, but once they are born it reverses and then it starts getting into all of the extremities. Hers didn't do that, so they had to go in and reverse it. So, yeah—and then she's got a little boy, and he's eleven. He's all boy. (Laughter) Well, it's—we've got a close-knit family, which my family, when I was growing up, we're not close. I've got a sister in California and she's been out there, well, just about ever since she has been married.

PIEHLER: So she married at fourteen, this is—did that marriage endure?

COLLINS: Yes, it did.

VINCENT: Wow.

PIEHLER: They're still married?

COLLINS: Still married. They have had three kids, two boys and a girl, and we probably talk about once every month or two months. We don't talk very often. I think that was a carryover from our childhood. But with my kids we talk everyday, a lot of times two and three times a day. But we have a close-knitted family.

PIEHLER: Your sister—her husband, what did he do for a living?

COLLINS: He's a machinist.

PIEHLER: He's a machinist.

COLLINS: Right.

PIEHLER: Where did he work in California?

COLLINS: He worked—he first started out in Phoenix. And then he moved from Phoenix up to Ventura County, up there in Oxnard [CA] and that's where he's been ever since. He used to work on the mottors on these oil wells and he done that work. They've been there—him and my sister have been married, well, I guess they got married in '62.

PIEHLER: What was the age difference? How old was your, your sister was fourteen. How old was her husband?

COLLINS: About sixteen. They grew up together

PIEHLER: Yeah, quite literally.

COLLINS: But, uh, she got married to get out of the house. She didn't like it either, so. But we, uh, my wife and I are close.

PIEHLER: Well, you mentioned off tape that you are on your 41st anniversary. Coming up.

COLLINS: Coming October, it will be forty-two.

PIEHLER: Forty-two.

COLLINS: Neither one of you are that old are you?

PIEHLER: No, no, no.

COLLINS: I'm probably as old as your parents are.

PIEHLER: No, parents are—my father, when he passed away he was in his eighties...

COLLINS: Was he.

PIEHLER: Yeah, and my mother is in her late sixties now so. And actually I'm forty-four, so I'm just a little older than your marriage, but not by much. (Laughter) Well that might be a good way to—have we forgotten to ask you anything that's important?

VINCENT: Is there anything you would like to add?

COLLINS: Yes, one thing. I would like to thank you for this opportunity to talk about what little life story I've got.

PIEHLER: We've really enjoyed it.

COLLINS: I hope that I've not been a bore. And I thank you both.

PIEHLER: Yeah, we've really ... and I really have to thank John on the record because he found you and I'm really glad he did. It's really been a delight to interview you and I think John really picked up some practical and broader, you know, tips for life, and for going back. So we really want to thank you again.

COLLINS: Always love your family. Is your momma still living?

PIEHLER: Yes, she's coming down in April, the end of April.

COLLINS: I was talking about memories, kay. When you got your memories of your dad, when he passed away, they become precious memories. Same thing will go with your mom.

PIEHLER: Yeah, that's very true.

COLLINS: They become precious. You got any sisters?

PIHLER: One sister. And a lot of step-sisters and step-brothers so.

COLLINS: Well, keep in touch.

PIEHLER: Yeah, it is good advice, it is good advice.

COLLINS: And show 'em that you love them. You will receive the love that you put out, but show 'em that you love them.

PIEHLER: Well, thank you very much.

