**John Metzger:** I’m John A. Metzger. J-O-H-N. A. And Metzger is M-E-T-Z-G-E-R. I don’t know why I’m hoarse.

**H Wayne Wilson:** It’s all right. It’s a Monday. We’re all that way, I think, at the beginning of the week.

**John Metzger:** It’s raining outside.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Yeah tha,t too. The weather’s miserable. Would you please, same thing, state and spell your place of birth.

**John Metzger:** I was born in Paducah, Kentucky. P-A-D-U-C-A-H. Kentucky.

**H Wayne Wilson:** And could you just say your birth date?

**John Metzger:** January 13, 1946.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Very good. Well, before we get started on some of these questions, I think it’s really important to find out who subjects and where they come from. So you were born in Paducah. Is that were you grew up?

**John Metzger:** I grew up in Metropolis, Illinois.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Oh, very good. My friend comes from there. Now, Metropolis, it’s not the smallest town on earth, but it’s kind of a small community. Can you talk a little bit about what life is like in Metropolis?

**John Metzger:** Well, Metropolis, of course, is like, I would say, ninety percent of the small towns in southern Illinois, or Illinois, period. Went to Metropolis High School. It’s the home of Superman. The Superman festival is coming up there this next weekend. And that, growing up there is pretty, pretty simple.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Talk a little bit about your family. Did you have brothers or sisters?

**John Metzger:** I have nine brothers. No, four brothers. There’s nine children in our family. Five brothers and four sisters. Four brothers and four sisters. I’ll get it right. It’s a large family, Catholic family, and, let’s see. My family was in the meat business in Metropolis. In Paducah, my dad had a long standing family had been, they made meat products, Metzger Meats out of Paducah. They lived in Metropolis. I don’t know what else you want me to say about my family.

**H Wayne Wilson:** It’s always nice to hear where we grew up and where we come from.

**John Metzger:** After I finished high school there, I went to SIU. It was just what you did. Everybody went to college. And in those days, you kind of went to college to keep from being drafted. I did, anyway. And when I came back from the Army, I went back to SIU and studied history. Both, first two degrees are in history there, and my PhD is in educational leadership where I became a school superintendent after that.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Where?

**John Metzger:** In Johnson City. Actually, I was in Benton a lot, but last place was in Johnson City.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Okay, very good, very good. And what year did you get your PhD?

**John Metzger:** 1982.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Okay. I was, I was around then.

**John Metzger:** Well, I studied about Delyte Morris and how he helped grow SIU with the use of his school board. That’s related to educational leadership. School board helps schools, obviously. They don’t just regulate them. They help superintendents and college presidents through their contacts and get the money that helps grow the places. So that’s why I was interest, to me.

**H Wayne Wilson:** President Morris is an extremely fascinating person to.

**John Metzger:** Oh yeah, if you got a look at his papers, go into collections up there, just box after box of yellow legal pads, and his. He could… as I looked at him over his years, you could see his scribbling got a little less legible, but he kept a lot of notes. What he was doing, obviously, you have to know what you’re doing. Who he talked to, what he talked about, who promised what and all that. It was pretty interesting.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Yeah, it’s getting better. How old were you when you first became of a conflict in Vietnam?

**John Metzger:** Well, actually, that’s an easy question to answer because I was going to U of I. My first year in college I went to U of I, and then I came back down to Southern. And one of the speech class assignments was to defend or attack the United States’ involvement in Vietnam, and so I had to give a speech on it. And I was all for it at that point, back in ’64. First year in college. Pretty interesting to see how my attitude kind of changed over the years.

**H Wayne Wilson:** I want to keep track of that. So let’s say that again just so I can make that a point. Your first year in college, your thoughts on the Vietnam War were something that had to be done.

**John Metzger:** Yep.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Was the spread of Communism a?

**John Metzger:** The domino theory, the spread of Communism, yeah. The reasoning behind it, if you didn’t stop them there, they were gonna be living right here in the United States. And they are, by the way.

**H Wayne Wilson:** I know. It’s amazing how things come true.

**John Metzger:** It is, really.

**H Wayne Wilson:** My generation, well not really my generation, but I think the generation, you can always ask them, where were you when the terrorist attacks of 9/11 happened, and almost all of them can say precisely, even if they were in grade school, yes, I was in Ms. Whoever’s class, and I remember that happening. And I find that with my parents’ generation, the baby boomer generation, almost everyone has that same ability to recall where they were when President Kennedy was assassinated. Do you remember, where you?

**John Metzger:** Oh yeah. I was in study hall at Metropolis High School in the afternoon, well about noon, study hall. And you can remember things like, I guess Kent State was a big event, kind of the anti-war movement. And while I was in Vietnam in 1969, at SIU, that’s when Old Main burned, burned during the riots. And I remember coming back from Vietnam, back to SIU, or not really back from Vietnam, but then I came back in January, went down and served in Fort Gordon, Georgia for six months. And then I got out, and when I went back to SIU that summer, the streets along, well I forgot the name of the street, but anyway, along the main drive there downtown, they were all boarded up with plywood and stuff because of the riots. Well, they let school out early that year, in May that year. But anyway, that’s when, you remember the anti-war movement, Kent State, and the burning of Old Main. Kinda being a history student, I was, that’s where professors were, and that’s where our offices were.

**H Wayne Wilson:** John, just noticing this, and if it’s a big deal don’t worry about it. Are you able to see okay without your glasses? Well, I’m getting a bit of a reflection here.

**John Metzger:** Oh, I can see fine without them.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Okay, we’ll go with that. Okay, hypothetical, this is almost a thought experiment. So there’s no right or wrong answer, it’s just your opinion, cause no one has the answer to this. If President Kennedy wasn’t assassinated and he had won a second term, do you think our involvement in Vietnam would’ve been different in any way?

**John Metzger:** Well, from study of history, the answer to that is no. He probably would’ve taken us right down the same path. We might not have gotten quite as involved. I mean, it kinda swallowed us up. But I think he had us headed there.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Let’s just follow that train just a little bit with the next few presidents. Lyndon B. Johnson, in the beginning, some evidence to say that he was reluctant to push us forward near the end of his presidency, obviously a lot less reluctant, a lot more hawkish, obviously with Robert McNamara backing his policies. What are your thoughts about the Johnson Administration as far as their foreign policy? Do you think that they were going the right path or?

**John Metzger:** I don’t have a lot of opinion on that. I know it caused him to quit being President, deciding not to run. I kinda wonder how anybody could really want to be President, cause all the things go on, and you’re just part of it. You’re not really leading a lot of it, you’re just reacting to a lot of it, and I think that’s what happened to him.

**H Wayne Wilson:** That’s very true. That’s very true. Now, were you drafted, or did you enlist?

**John Metzger:** Well, my deferments finally ended when I graduated the first time in 1968. I had a low draft number, and so it was obvious I was gonna get to be a soldier. And instead of being drafted, there was a two-year enlistment at that time, and so I decided to join for two years rather than be drafted because I figured, well, I’d rather be in basic training in the summer than the winter. So that’s what happened. I joined up and just quit fighting the idea of being in the Army, resisting it, I should say. I quit resisting that idea, and figured I was gonna have to do what everybody else was doing then. I was married at that time. I went into the Army in July, and I got married in December before that to my high school sweetheart. We had no children, of course, at that time. You can also get a deferment as a teacher, and I was a teacher then, on a provisional certificate over in Missouri where we lived the last quarter that I was a student after I got married. We lived over just across the Chester Bridge in Missouri. And these people wanted, the Administration over there wanted me to continue my deferment and become a teacher there, and I was, just said, I did this long enough. It’s time to become a soldier. Just cause I wasn’t gonna not be one, that wasn’t something that would be acceptable to my family, me, anyone.

**H Wayne Wilson:** You felt some obligation to do that?

**John Metzger:** To be a soldier?

**H Wayne Wilson:** Yeah.

**John Metzger:** Yeah, definitely. It wasn’t a big tradition in my family. I had an older brother who’d been in the military, and a brother-in-law who’d been in the Korean conflict. Just patriotism, I guess. I was gonna do my duty.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Did you have a, what were you hoping, I don’t like the phrasing of this question, they say, what were you hoping to do in Vietnam? Did you have a goal, going over there?

**John Metzger:** Well, once I got into the military, basic training and all that, all these at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, everybody there was talking about going to Vietnam, being assigned to their infantry, artillery, and I didn’t much want to do that. In fact before that, of course having my college degree already, recruiters wanted me to be an officer. I didn’t much want to do that either because you hear all the stories about how long an officer might live over there in that war. So as I was in basic training, they came around one day and asked if anybody wanted to be, volunteer to be a chaplain’s assistant. And so, infantry, artillery, chaplain’s assistant. Well, that sounded a little bit more up my alley. So I said, “Yeah, I’ll do that.” So they checked with the priest in my Catholic family I told you about. And I guess they did, they said they did. And got a good reference as my background, I guess, and so they made my MOS chaplain’s assistant, which, a chaplain’s assistant is a person who assists the chaplain in anything he wants to do. Like driving places, serve mass, count the people in the service, run his office for him, type for him, drive him. That’s the job of the chaplain’s assistant. You don’t have to preach, yourself, but you help.

**H Wayne Wilson:** You assist.

**John Metzger:** You assist, okay, so then the training for the chaplain’s assistant was in Fort, first you went to clerk typist school. That’s your next training, AIT they call it, advanced training. And so I went to Fort Dix, New Jersey for that, clerk typist training. And then the next spot after that was Fort Hamilton, New York, which was right at the base of New York City, where the Verrazano Bridge is, and that was where the, like a six weeks training about what a chaplain’s assistant really does. So I was kind of a pretty good student, and I was the number one graduate in that class, which helped me out, really, not just to be bragging. But when I got to Vietnam, they were looking for assignment for you at that point, and they said, well, we could use you, since you were such a graduate, use you in the support command headquarters. So I had a nicer assignment that way. Rather than being out in the field, as a chaplain’s assistant I got to be in the office, sort of, and support. So it kind of added up for me.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Did you serve in that role throughout your time in Vietnam?

**John Metzger:** Yeah. I was chaplain’s assistant for that year over there. I was in Vietnam from January to January of 1969. A lot of people had the opportunity to extend, stay and then be dismissed from the Army or let out, honorably discharged, if you would extend like another month, but I didn’t want to do that. So I came back and went to Fort Gordon, Georgia, as a safety NCO for that, another support type assignment. And Fort Gordon, Georgia is in Augusta, Georgia. Got to go see the Masters that year. In fact, that was one of the benefits of being in the military at that time. There was a benefit. If you would wear a uniform, like when I was in New York, we could go downtown and watch the plays and ride the subway for free, get into the plays for free on Broadway, all the museums let you in free. So that was a neat thing.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Can you talk about your first day off the plane in Vietnam? A lot of people talk about the culture shock.

**John Metzger:** Yeah. Can we go back and talk about my first day?

**H Wayne Wilson:** Yeah, absolutely.

**John Metzger:** Can we talk about my first day in basic training?

**H Wayne Wilson:** Let’s do the first day in basic training.

**John Metzger:** Speaking of culture shock. That was, when we went to St. Louis, my wife and I went over there to St. Louis. We went to the ball game that night, and then they put you on that bus the next morning, and then at the Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, also known as Fort Lost in the Woods, Misery.

Anyway, you had, “Hurry up! Get this! Pick that up! Let’s go!’ You get military-wired real quick. “What do you mean you don’t wanna run? We’re running with this bag, pick it up, soldier! Get down and give me ten pushups, or give me twenty!” And that’s the first day.

Okay, going back to the first day in Vietnam, we went over there on a passenger plane. Huge plane. And they had them especially squeezed up in the plane. The seats were pushed together more than they usually are, I thought, anyway. And they land on the way over there at Guam to refuel. And then they land at Tan Son Nhat Airport, which is the place where all the soldiers that I know of, anyway, came in through. And at that point, they, that’s where they made this assignment, where I was to go to Quy Nhơn in support command. Q-U-I-N-H-O-N, Quy Nhơn, Vietnam in support command. And I was assigned to Chaplain Russell, Jack Russell, Catholic priest. Anyway, how was that first day of the culture shock? Well, you know. You had a barracks you had and slept in, and then they put you on another airplane, a smaller plane that flew you up to Quy Nhơn. And when you got there, they took you to a place, a barracks, this is your room. A room, this is where you’re sleeping. We made rooms with them with plywood and things like that. We built ourselves little cubicles. I had roommates. And over there is your office, that’s where I worked, at an office. And that’s where you eat, that’s where you sleep, that’s where you’re gonna work. There. Welcome to Vietnam.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Talked a little in your bio here, maybe you can expand upon it a bit, about the Camp Granite attacks?

**John Metzger:** Yeah, that was the name of the compound we were at, was Camp Granite. And it was at the, we were on the beach. Quy Nhơn is a beach city, the ocean right out there, and behind it is some low mountains, we’ll call them. They’re not real high, they’re big hills, kinda like around here, really. And you had your barracks and your support command headquarters at the base of this hill around you, so the enemy, which in our case was never North Vietnamese, it was always Viet Cong in this area. The VC, we’d call them, they would send up sappers, these are like sneak attack people with explosives. And they would sneak onto the hills behind you and they would send, attack your, the base. Rocket attacks and they just sneaked down in sometimes, just exploded everything. It wasn’t suicide attacks. They would plant them and then leave. The purpose of Quy Nhơn, this is where they loaded, they stored the gas and the supplies that went further inland to the war. That was a pipeline from Quy Nhơn up into country, and so ships would come in, unload their supplies, and it was our job to move the supplies onto the war. So as a Chaplain’s assistant, gotta take care of all the needs, which would be like praying and religious services.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Did it, just because of the nature of your service, was it, I’m trying to phrase this properly, was it ever difficult to be spiritual? For someone, like, to help someone, even if you, yourself, that moment, didn’t quite maybe feel it? Or was it always kind of natural to you?

**John Metzger:** Well, it was basically still just a job. For me, it’s just my nature. I’m sure there was some of them who, some of the assistants who probably were more spiritual than I was. But on a typical Sunday, we would have eight masses that we went to. And every day of the week, we had like five or six, so on a typical week, I would go to church eight and, six times six, thirty six, about forty to fifty times a week. And so I would deal with the Catholics, so, just like an altar boy. You read homily, you pour the wine in the chalice and that sort of thing. And after you’re done with that you count how many people were there. I got twenty five at this service, you got paperwork that you turn in. Military counts the bodies, they also count how many people came to this, how many bullets they used, how much wine they used. And you passed the plate, collection plate. People gave a little offering. And from support command, you went out to the other places where the services were being held. They didn’t come to you. You went to them. Some of them came in, but most of them, we went out to them. And then my job on Mondays was everybody brought their money to me. We kept a set of books on the offerings, which we used in our office, the offerings were collected and used however the commander wanted to use them. The priest at that time, he gave them to the Catholic school and that sort of thing in Quy Nhơn.

**H Wayne Wilson:** What was it like, cause you said the Viet Cong would attack, I mean, obviously, you were living very close to the enemy lines. What is your mentality knowing that the enemy is just so close to you at all times, really?

**John Metzger:** Well, that’s the way it was in Vietnam. You didn’t know if this Vietnamese was on your side or that one was on the other side. The ones that came in and worked for us into our compound, they would clean your hooches, we called them, that would be your room, your hut, in our case, your barracks. They would also wash your clothes and shine your shoes and they worked for you. We had an office boy that swept up in the office where I was. Seemed to me like he was never there the day after an attack but that was maybe just supposition. I think I got a picture of him in one of those.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Oh, sure.

**John Metzger:** But they were, don’t let me forget to tell you about that too, right on the back side of our compound, SIU had a branch over there in Quy Nhơn for a few years. It was something to look up sometime. It was called SIU Quy Nhơn. And I decided I was gonna go over to see it cause I’m an SIU student, and it was kinda like a junior college type thing, except not quite that big. Maybe seven or eight classrooms and an office, built pretty nicely.

**H Wayne Wilson:** And they would help soldiers get their degrees or?

**John Metzger:** No, not soldiers. For Vietnamese. This was all about.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Oh, this is for the Vietnamese people. I’m sorry. I got you, I understand.

**John Metzger:** It wasn’t about soldiers going to school. It was all about helping pacify, what are you gonna call it, the local people. Help them. Kinda like, now in the war over in Iraq or Afghanistan, it’s a big thing about helping the economy where these people will want to be on our side, not their side. So that’s what they did there. And I just remembered that, kinda forgot about that Quy Nhơn Salukis.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Talk a little bit about your assignment for the sacrament of last rites. It says here that you would drive the chaplain to the morgue.

**John Metzger:** Well, that was probably my least favorite duty, obviously. Part of what, and the Catholic religion, the last rites, you know, they have the priest to put the oils on the head of the person who died. So being in support, you wouldn’t think about the people who died, but they were brought out of the country where they might’ve had their fights with the enemy, and they were put in the morgue, and they would be taken in ships, airplanes. They had a big airport right there, too. Taken back to the United States. So the Chaplain would get calls, and every so often. Actually, how often was it, probably once or twice a week. And we had to go to the morgue and I worked for the priest, so that was part of my job. We also had another guy who helped the priest, too. He did this too. So he’d go to the, they were in body bags, and you unzip them, kinda hold it out of the away so the priest can put the oil on whatever’s still in that body bag. A lot of times it was not really recognizable, that’s some of the trauma you might still remember, but anyway. So one of the jobs I had to do. Needless to say, I delegated that job as often as I could.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Can’t imagine how difficult that would be. Talk a little bit, cause you say it here, about, cause you just said the bodies would be in various states of dismemberment due to combat. Put us there. You talked about the smells and the sights. I just think that we could paint a pretty adequate picture for someone listening at home. So you walk in the morgue. Sort of put us there a little bit more. You open a body bag. Is there an experience that just sort of stands out for you?

**John Metzger:** Well, those are the kind of things that you try to forget. But I don’t if you probably want to use this or not, but we, jokingly, we could call them crispy critters. Sure not proud of that, but you know. And we sometimes we would do that. Anyway, they would be, obviously it was hot over there, wasn’t air conditioning. So things were in the state of decomposing, and the smell. Kept the flies out as much as you could. Vietnam is a very hot place, you know. Got used to, when I got there, got used to the heat, more or less. Seventy degrees was cool. Hundred and ten or so was normal, for me. And it rained. The monsoon came. So they had a season of rain, where like today is a very rainy day here. But when it let up during the monsoon, when it let up to like it is now, we kinda thought it quit. You just got used to it, you get used to that weather. So you had smells, you had flies, it’s just the way it was. Even though this was a place built to take bodies out of the country, it still was, you can look at pictures, things were temporary. We weren’t planning to stay there forever. Now, we always joked about how good the Air force guys had it because their buildings were more substantial than ours.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Now, did you say the chaplain’s name was Russell?

**John Metzger:** Yeah, Father Jack Russell.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Talk a little bit about him. Who is he?

**John Metzger:** Well, he came from Boston. And I always thought, he was kind of a little short, stocky, redheaded, like you might think an Irishman from Boston would be. He was a little on the crotchety side, too, I would say. I figured, how’d they get a Catholic chaplain? Probably didn’t necessarily volunteer, although some of them did, I’d say, but the bishops assigned him to the military. So let’s see, I got five guys here, pretty good priests, that one over there, he’s going. So that’s the way I figured, anyway. And he was probably about, oh, sixty at that time, maybe fifty-five to sixty. And he had high blood pressure, I’ll tell you that, cause he’d get so mad the blood would just kinda pop out on his neck at times. And he’d say, “Metzger, if you don’t shape up, I’m gonna send you to (unintelligible).” And I’d say, “Oh no, Father, don’t send me there.” It was kinda funny. And we always made jokes about how the lifers were, what we called the lifers, those were the ones in the military to stay, as opposed to the ones who were there just cause we had to be. But he, well in order to make more rank and to get more pay and privileges, we thought, you know, you’d better get where the war is cause that’s where you get your medals, that’s where you get known. But really looking back on it, he was probably doing his duty cause that’s where he was needed also.

**H Wayne Wilson:** And you served under him for your duration for that year?

**John Metzger:** Yeah. Worked for the same guy for a year. And we’d, he was my immediate supervisor. And our office, talk about your office in Vietnam, there were about three or four chaplain’s assistants. And then the other chaplains in the area reported to Father Russell, and they would out be living in the forward positions and things. Some of them were like younger, nicer people, in my opinion. But kind of the military way.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Talk a little bit about, cause I have a brilliant note here, and I’m gonna butcher the name. Pleiku trip?

**John Metzger:** Pleiku.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Pleiku. I was so close but so far.

**John Metzger:** Pleiku and An Khê. Father Russell liked to travel as much as he could in Vietnam. I kind of thought it was just, as I just said, maybe a way for him to make rank, move up in the ranks. But anyway, he decided he was gonna go to Pleiku, which was about a four hour jeep ride out to the west of Quy Nhơn. Of course, I couldn’t see any reason to be going there, but he had a reason. He wanted to go up and see some people that he knew, and so his drivers, that would be me and, we had a sergeant that was over at the rest of the office, and another young man, a chaplain’s assistant like me. We all, that was four of us in the jeep, that’s how many of us would fit in there. And that’s, we decided we would go up there. Well, he decided, so we had to take him. The purpose of the trip was to deliver communion hosts and sacramental wine up to where the chaplains needed them in Pleiku. I’m kind of glad we went on that trip now, looking back on it, but I wasn’t too in favor of it at that time. But it was, got to see the countryside, got to go through the An Khê Pass, which was the road that went up through the mountains. An Khê was the site of where the French Army was finally defeated as they left Vietnam. As they were leaving, they were ambushed in this An Khê Pass. They had a memorial in the Pass to the French soldiers who died there. Also a place called Dien Bien Phu was where they were actually defeated in their last battle against Ho Chi Minh. But left through An Khê Pass and out through Quy Nhơn. So we headed out from Quy Nhơn on a blacktop road that was used by our convoys, which took the supplies from Quy Nhơn up into the country where the more intense fighting was. We had our rifles and we had grenade launches in our jeep with us. And also, mounted on the jeep was an M60, which is kinda like a machine gun. Still can’t believe we did that. We didn’t fly in a helicopter. We just drove.

**H Wayne Wilson:** What was going through your mind at that time? Was it scary?

**John Metzger:** Well, I didn’t drive. I sat in the back.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Oh sure, but was it a little unnerving?

**John Metzger:** I’d say, yeah, cause you could feel them as you went through Pass, especially, that they were there watching you. And they just decided that we weren’t the target of the day, cause every convoy that went through this Pass up to Pleiku, down the road, was probably, almost everyone of them would be ambushed. That’s just part of the job of the truck drivers to be ambushed, get their supplies through. So you could feel the hair on the back of your neck kinda stand up. You knew they were watching you. It just wasn’t our time to be attacked. Also, along the road was the pipeline that took the gas and oil up to these inland places, and as it shows there, I got pictures of bodies where some of the VC had been ambushed themselves, trying to blow up that pipeline. That’s pretty gruesome. One of them had their toothbrush there and their toothpaste. And they just, they ended their lives, which thankfully it wasn’t us. So we went up there, all the way to Pleiku, and we spent the night with that chaplain’s group, and then drove back the next day. Uneventful, really, except for seeing these bodies along the road, and feeling that they were watching you. But they didn’t attack us.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Thank God.

**John Metzger:** Would’ve been easy pickings.

**H Wayne Wilson:** My goodness. It’s so interesting to, not interesting, well interesting, and almost unimaginable sometimes when you hear stories. Just to drive was to put yourself in harm’s way. Just to go out on the open road was a gigantic risk, really.

**John Metzger:** Another place Father Russell liked to go was to the leprosarium. A leprosarium was a place where they kept lepers, more or less, quarantined from the regular population cause that was, we don’t really have that much in America. I think there’s a few lepers down in Louisiana area, or there used to be, but it was a real problem in that third country, Vietnam. And Quy Nhơn has been a French city. Vietnam’s a French colony, Quy Nhơn was a French city, Catholic city in that mind. By the way, it was a city of about two hundred fifty thousand people in Quy Nhơn. So he would want to drive out to the leprosarium, which you left our compound and drove out about five miles to the countryside, and drove to this really beautiful spot, believe it or not. It was a beautiful beach, you might think, I always thought, “Man, this would be a great tourist attraction someday.” Had the church there and the dorms where these people lived. In the French missionary tradition, all visitors always had wine and cake. Now, they didn’t give us wine, but they gave us cakes. It was kind of like, it was just part of the hospitality of the place, traditional. Kinda like in the old world. We had like sponge cake. Anyway. The priest, of course, the other ranking people would get the wine, too. And we would go out there and visit with them a little bit. I don’t know really what the purpose was. They didn’t tell us what we were doing out there, but just to go see the other priests, I guess, what we thought he was doing. Later on, it became not quite as beautiful a place because they used the Agent Orange to defoliate the palm trees along the beach, which I, what do I know, but it didn’t seem like it was a place that threatened. But during the year, the palm trees were defoliated by Agent Orange.

**H Wayne Wilson:** What is Agent Orange?

**John Metzger:** Agent Orange, as far as I know, is a chemical that you would use, it’s a herbicide to kill foliage. So the reason the military used it was to get rid of the brush where the enemy would hide, so it was a lot easier to fight them if you could see them. So you sprayed Agent Orange. As I’m sure you’ve heard, it was a big health problem to the soldiers who actually handled it and were exposed to it. Cause you would spray it out of helicopters and then breathe it in, get it on your skin. And a lot of veterans now experience things like, oh maybe cancer or diabetes, heart disease, they link it back to this Agent Orange, which just kind of makes it one of the long-term problems of the war. Not just the fifty eight thousand people who died then, but the long-term problems to their health from Agent Orange, and from the PTSD memories. But anybody who served their country in wartime has been through that.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Absolutely.

**John Metzger:** So we went out to there, to the leprosarium. I probably never seen a leper, but it was kind of interesting experience for me cause they would have fingers be gone, hands gone. I remember seeing several, their noses were gone, and they would have like a cork where your nose is supposed to be. I guess it kind of make your face a little.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Like a wine cork, almost?

**John Metzger:** Yeah. Well, kind of a, more of a, about that big around. But their ears would be gone, noses gone. We were sure it wasn’t catching, though.

**H Wayne Wilson:** I would imagine. Did you have to take any precautions while you were there? Extra precautions as far as contamination or anything like that?

**John Metzger:** Not really. I don’t really know how it’s passed now, but I know it’s not just one of those things.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Sure, sure. Excuse me. Let’s hit some of these questions from WTVP so I do not forget. Let’s talk a little bit about the protests back at home because they were a big thing. And they ranged. You had peaceful protests from, perhaps, some of the hippie movement. You also had the other extreme. You had the Black Panthers, you had the Weathermen, who went underground after targeting government buildings. You had the gentleman who lit himself on fire outside of Robert McNamara’s office, almost taking his child with him. What were your thoughts, let’s bifurcate this a bit, what were your thoughts of the protests before you went in?

**John Metzger:** Well, they intensified with time. And I was in the military, I was in Vietnam from January to January, ’69 to ’70. And as we, as the war, I guess, Tet Offensive came along, we’re supposed to be winning this, and here they can kill a lot of our soldiers and take back any cities they want to. Obviously, we haven’t won, so that kind of intensified and gave strength to the end the war movement. So here I am over in Vietnam at the time that they burned down Old Main, for instance, on the SIU campus. Kent State happened at the same time. We really, you just couldn’t concentrate on it. You were there to do your job as your soldier and stay alive. And it was just something that was going on.

**H Wayne Wilson:** When you returned home, did you have any experiences with protestors? A lot of veterans talk about negative experiences.

**John Metzger:** I kinda stayed away from that sort of thing. I came back. I got an early out. I got out of the military six weeks early to start back in summer school at SIU. I went back there to get my master’s degree. They got me out of the military early. The Army didn’t need me, obviously. I was not gonna be one of them. So came back to SIU, as I said earlier, and the streets were boarded up, the glass all broken out from the protests, and started back to school. I didn’t really get involved in that, anti-war protests. I wanted to resume my life. And one of the positive things to say about it was, I was given the GI Bill, so every bit of schooling I did after my first degree was paid for by the US government, state of Illinois, whatever. Free books. Pretty well. So that was a good thing.

**H Wayne Wilson:** That is a good thing. That’s a very good thing.

**John Metzger:** And I like to think, at times, maybe I did return something back to society as a, it wasn’t all bad. Got to go to war, yay. But I was there, and as I came back, as a result, got to go to school free and became a school superintendent. And I like to think I left some places better than I found them, so there was a positive side to that.

**H Wayne Wilson:** It’s always nice to hear that, actually. Another note here. Could you just talk about the helicopter flights to artillery bases?

**John Metzger:** Well, as I said earlier, we, part of the main job as a chaplain’s assistant was to go out to the, assist the priest and his services. So sometimes we went on the road. A lot of times we went in the helicopters. And the artillery bases were out around Quy Nhơn. They would shoot artillery in support of ground troops who were fighting in other areas out away from us. So we would fly out there with priest and have mass there, go to another one, have mass on Sundays especially. Weekdays, it didn’t matter. We’d visit each one once a week, generally. And you fly out there and have the service. They might be shooting while you’re having the service. You had to hold onto your plate cause vibrating from the… People were shooting at us, we were shooting at them. Anyway.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Yeah, no, did you, excuse me, on the, had a question here, where was it.

**John Metzger:** Well, I gotta remember one other thing I should say just.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Oh, please go ahead. I was lost in my own thought there for a moment.

**John Metzger:** I was in support command. People don’t probably think about this, but we did. We had flush toilets, hot showers, and air conditioned office. And nobody believed that in Vietnam, but one of the benefits where I worked. Our barracks didn’t have that. We had a fan, electric fan. A lot of the guys who I’ve talked to, who just stayed out in the bushes, but yeah. That was kind of a, I always say, well I was in Vietnam, but I had flush toilets, hot shower, and air conditioned office to work in, even though it was just a window unit. But that’s what a lot of us back at SIU had at the same time, too. We also, at Quy Nhơn, had a beach that was ours, not too far away from our compound. And when we weren’t working, which you worked pretty well seven days a week, but now and then you’d get a little time off, we could go to the beach and swim, or they had little sunfish sailboats there. I’m a sailor now. I have been since that time, and that’s where I learned to sail, is in Vietnam.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Interesting.

**John Metzger:** Kinda interesting, yeah. You didn’t really want to swim too much in this water, though, cause it was the ocean. It was kinda going down to Biloxi area, if you get an idea of that kind of a beach, but over on this side, about three or four hundred yards away, the Vietnamese that lived in Quy Nhơn and didn’t have plumbing, they would go to the beach and do their morning constitutional on the beach, waiting for the tide to come in and flush it. So that wasn’t that far from our beach, so you kinda had to be careful. But we did get in the water some, and I was just, the beach is always interesting.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Oh yeah.

**John Metzger:** And at different times we would have like, I remember, at that time there was a movie, I forget the name of it, where they ate the, had a contest to see who could eat the most boiled eggs. We did that. We had a contest like.

**H Wayne Wilson:** *Cool Hand Luke.*

**John Metzger:** Yeah, on the Fourth of July we’re gonna a contest to see who could eat the most, or the most hotdogs or something, just something to.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Was it you?

**John Metzger:** No I didn’t win. I didn’t want to get involved in too much.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Sure.

**John Metzger:** And another thing we did, we had to do guard duty around our compound. As I told you, we had the tank farms up the road, and you still had to be, make sure the sappers didn’t sneak in on you. We couldn’t do nothing about the rockets, but you still had to do guard duty. So everybody in the compound did that. You would be on the perimeter in these guard towers, which is the typical scene from Vietnam, probably a picture there. So you get to, on guard duty, you, everybody was assigned on a rotating basis. And you had to be inspected before you went on guard duty. And you would be on, the night was divided into three shifts, so you’d be on like four hours, and off four hours, and on four hours. You’d do that and around the compound. Also we had to go out to the tank farms and do that, and also up on that mountain, (unintelligible) Mountain, you’d kinda had rats up in there where you’d go sit and stay. Hopefully some VC would come by and would get to ambush them. Out in the tank farms: I’ll never forget this one evening I was on the gate. My job was to guard the job. I had a guy who I would take turns with. He was a sleep, I’d be awake, and vice versa. So it was his turn to be awake, and I was rudely awakened by our military police with their dogs kinda circling the tank farm. The tank farm is a set of tanks where they stored petroleum products. But this guy was asleep instead of being awake, and so they were honking the horn and standing there waiting for us to open the gates. So that was the last time I slept that night, obviously. And that young man, he was eighteen years old, which I was already twenty-three or twenty-four by then. He was from Possum Trot, Kentucky, so that’s just past Paducah. So we had to do that, the guard duty, and so it wasn’t all peaches and cream.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Sure, sure, yeah. Did you ever experience combat during those?

**John Metzger:** Well, in the guard duty, yeah. You had to. As far as large scale North Vietnamese attack, no. But VC here and there, seeing the bodies, the remains of it, yeah. Not hand-to-hand by any means. I was fortunate. Like I said, back in basic training, I said, oh, chaplain’s assistant. Maybe I won’t have to go to Vietnam, that was the first thought. And once you’re there, maybe I won’t have to do quite the things that these other people are getting ready to do, so.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Let’s talk a little bit about, you said you got your, you were processed to go home six weeks early so you can get back in school. What was going through your mind when you got the news that you would be going back?

**John Metzger:** A chance to get out. You know, people, I guess, human nature, whatever, always wanna be doing something different than they are doing.

**H Wayne Wilson:** That’s true.

**John Metzger:** But I was, I didn’t have a strong military tradition in my family, but I knew I was gonna serve. I didn’t extend in Vietnam, like they said. I could’ve stayed over there and just be discharged as soon as you landed back in the United States. I didn’t do that cause I didn’t want to stay over there any longer than I had to. When we first got there, the Camp Granite attacks where quite as often, but they seemed to be picking up.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Really. So you saw a marked change from the amount of attacks from the time you started to when you actually were processed out.

**John Metzger:** Right. In fact, towards the end of, we had rockets actually land in neighboring barracks and kill some of the guys staying there, living there. Anyway, so it was going through my mind, a chance to get out, process out, quick as you can, get back to SIU and get on with my life. Get back to, literally, my wife, that sort of thing.

**H Wayne Wilson:** It’s very nice to hear that you were able to come back and accomplish, I mean, you’re still accomplishing things, but you’re still accomplishing things, but you were able to accomplish so much, just back. Was there a period of decompression for you, on the way back? That you just had to get used to civilian life?

**John Metzger:** Yeah, that’s, and it was, as you’ll hear from a lot of Vietnam veterans, there was no parades, no welcome home. I never was spat upon, as I hear some of the soldiers say, but I remember coming home. My wife lived in, she lived with her parents at the time that I was over there, and they lived in New Jersey at that time. Anyway, we met in Philadelphia, so I was flown to Philadelphia Airport in the winter, January. It was getting chilly there that night, and we’d just come from a hundred degrees, and you land there. Well, I had, the uniform you had to wear was just lightweight, kinda summer wear, but didn’t care, we were gonna get it back. So that was good. And then you just kinda had to get used to real life again. I remember traveling from there, I drove to here in her car. We met at the airport, went and visited her family, and that was from New York area, Philadelphia area, the big city in the east coast, and we drove back into Kentucky, you know. It’s just, Vietnam, east coast, and then we’re in the hills of Kentucky. And then back in, back home for a while, then down to Fort Gordon, Georgia, and then back to SIU as a student again.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Do you remember your thoughts when you either saw or read or heard that President Ford was gonna pull out the troops. Of course, we have those dramatic images of people hanging onto helicopters trying to get out of there. What were your thoughts as that was going on? You probably have a unique perspective having being there.

**John Metzger:** Well, by that time, we realized we weren’t gonna win there, and we probably never should’ve been there to start with, and fifty eight thousand soldiers have died. So it was just part of getting out of it. I was all in favor, though, of the negotiating, ending of the war. I mean, they had to end it some way. We just couldn’t stay there. So very dramatic events that you watched. See, that was about five years after 1975, so I’m already back four or five years. And they got to arguing about the shape of the peace talk table, and how to get out was the issue at that point.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Do you have any recollections of media coverage, just in general, around that time? I think that was one of the first times that you had Edward R. Murrow during World War II, and you had almost this sense of, there’s a theory that no journalism is truly objective. Just reporting on a subject means you’re choosing one subject over the other, but I think there was a lot of pride taken among journalists of the Murrow era to be objective. And then once you got in the Vietnam War, you started to see television personalities, Uncle Walter, start speaking out, start being opinionated. What are your thoughts about the media coverage during that time? Just in general? Do you think it was fair, unfair? Biased?

**John Metzger:** You got to watch it every night at the supper table, the body counts. We killed two hundred of theirs today, and they killed fifty of ours. I’ve always said, if we added all those body counts up, there wouldn’t be anybody left in Vietnam. But it was just every night at supper, which we did sit down in those days and eat supper, you got to watch the war on television. Kinda interesting. And the news coverage we had over there, if you’ve seen the movie *Good Morning, Vietnam*.

**H Wayne Wilson:** I have.

**John Metzger:** That’s kind of similar to what my duty station was in the big city, a big city. We would go downtown in the area around the compound when we weren’t working. And that got to be pretty dangerous also. Go down to have a beer with the ladies of Vietnam. Hey, GI, you buy me Saigon tea. You know, that’s what they called, which is, they would want you to buy them a drink. Come in and have a few beers, go back where you were.

**H Wayne Wilson:** This is kind of a hard question cause it could be answered in so many ways. We can start wrapping this up a bit, and thank you for your time. We’re forty, almost forty years removed. Has your perspective of the war changed at all over the past several decades, or has it kind of stayed the same since you got out?

**John Metzger:** Oh, I’d say it stayed the same. I mean, it was, when I was there, I knew I had to go, but by ’69, ’70, it was pretty obvious we weren’t gonna win it. I was kinda in the middle, you know. It was a waste, in my opinion, of all those people’s lives. But you just think about the, what we call then, the Military Industrial Complex, and war is a big business. But on the other hand, you need to be, have people prepared to fight because we’re gonna have to do that now and then, or you just won’t have that. Our peace is because of our strength, I think, anyway.

**H Wayne Wilson:** I always found it interesting that it was, you know, Eisenhower, heroic general from World War II, who really was the, one of the first to warn us about a potential problem with Military Industrial Complex, that it’s something that has to be kept in check, it’s a valuable resource, but it has to be kept in check, too. And I think that’s, the opinion, obviously the Cold War had a lot to play on that. That’s one thing I forgot to ask you. Were you, because we talked a little about the domino effect. Just real quick, was Communism the spread there of a concern for you going into the war?

**John Metzger:** Well, not really. It didn’t matter that much. Anyway.

**H Wayne Wilson:** I was just curious. Some people, that tends to be a motivating factor for some people, it’s just really not a factor at all.

**John Metzger:** We went to the war cause we had to, I told you earlier. I mean, it wasn’t something you wanted to do. It’s just what America was about at that time. And your family before you, some of them had done it. Americans had done it, it’s just part of our history.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Is there anything you wish I kinda would’ve asked and I just didn’t get a chance to.

**John Metzger:** Well, I think I brought up, went down a few trails for you.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Yeah, no, that’s great.

**John Metzger:** I wanted to get the information out about how my life was there that year. I know it was a, going over there, you get there in January, and you think, it’s a long time till next January. And you just wrote home every day, and they wrote, mail calls big time, find out what’s going on at home. And I’ve still got a big satchel about that big of letters. I’ve saved them all. I did get them out and look at them now and then cause I thought they would be maybe a real cash of information there, but probably it wasn’t. I’m gonna still do that more in depth, just, I was pretty busy then, too. But anyway, thank you for your time doing this.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Thank you, John. I really appreciate this, sir.

**John Metzger:** And I’ll try to help you get more people to interview.

**H Wayne Wilson:** Oh, any effort you could give would be so greatly appreciated cause this is such a great opportunity for, and I was telling some of the others too that, you know, one of the veterans mentioned that his niece was reading about the Vietnam War in her history class, and it consisted of two pages in her book. To me, something like this allows a new generation to really get information that you just can’t get out of two pages of a textbook. Two pages of textbooks are great, but the fact that these stories are gonna get out there, I think, is gonna really have a good, solid, positive impact. So thank you so much. I really appreciate your help with this.