

Oral History Transcript

Interviewer: David Bice

Interviewee: Dr. Philip Beidler

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This recording starts towards the end of a conversation between David Bice and Dr. Philip Beidler that was held immediately prior to the start of the interview.

Dr. Beidler: That was, that 365 days policy was not a good policy because it takes a soldier about 3 months to get good on the battlefield, and then you're good for about maybe 3, 4 months more. And then for the last 3 or 4 months you're just, you're not really sharp. You're thinking about going home, and you're, the way you look at the mission, you know, with your troops, you're thinking: ahh you know I got to get these guys out of here safe. So (*Dr. Beidler gives a short laugh*).

David Bice: I remember in one of your books you called it being short. Shorter than the next guy.

Dr. Beidler: Yeah, yeah exactly. If you got, if you got through that short timer thing, you know you went home, and then these, but these poor young guys and women that have been in the recent campaign, they've had 3 or 4 or 5 tours which is just, you know, most of us have, I know I do, and I think a lot of us have a dream, its sort of an annual dream. And the dream is we got to go back there. But the difference is, at least my dream is I got to go back there and I'm always what age I am in the dream. Like if I had the dream when I was 55, then I was 55 years old in the dream, but the bottom line was that this time my luck had run out. That I was gone and I wasn't coming back. And, but you know, and the other thing that they tried to correct between Vietnam and the Desert Wars, you know in Vietnam you came to your unit one by one by one by one. Only in the first part of the war did the entire 1st Cavalry come, or the entire, you know, 173rd Airborne, or you know and, and that idea of unit deployment was something else that they tried to... correct in the Desert Wars. And, you know, they were right in some ways and they were wrong in others, but, but everybody the first day, the first day you got in country you stepped off that freedom bird, we called that airplane, you know, civilian airline. Started checking off the days, you know.

David Bice: Well, I suppose, um, first thing is first. Could you tell me your name for the sake of the interview?

Dr. Beidler: Yeah, I'm Philip Beidler, uh, I was until recently I was the Margaret and William Goin Professor of English at the University of Alabama. I had an endowed share, and I've been here for 45 years. First, first and only job out of graduate school. Which was after Vietnam. I went to, I did my PhD on the G.I. Bill.

David Bice: Um, well as I told you before I have a couple of questions here, but if any of them trigger anything, or you want to talk about something else feel free to do that.

Dr. Beidler: You go right ahead.

David Bice: I believe my first question is: How old were you when you joined the military?

Dr. Beidler: I was, uh, 23. The reason being, I was a little older, I had gone to Davidson College, North Carolina, and I was an ROTC officer, but I had gotten such a prestigious fellowship in English, it was called the Woodrow Wilson Fellowship, and it was like getting a, a Rhodes Scholarship in America. And so, the Army did not claim me right away, they did not... They said you, you go get your, you go get your masters degree, and what I didn't realize, in those days, it's like the Army, there was always somebody that doesn't get the word. That I could have stayed for my PhD, which would have gotten me all the way through about 1972, 1973. And then I could have done my active duty teaching at West Point, which is what they wanted me to do. But I didn't know that, so when I finished my Master's Degree, I told them I was done. And they took me. They needed Lieutenants.

David Bice: That actually answers my next question: what did you do before joining the military? But, um.

Dr. Beidler: I was an English major in college, and yeah.

David Bice: So how did your family feel when you joined, and were sent off to Vietnam?

Dr. Beidler: My family were the World War II generation. And that was the sort of social and almost, you might say, political and ethical environment that I grew up in. My father was a food chemist, so he was completely deferred. He was the director of a big food processing company, and they left those guys at home because, you know, they made the food, you know they were, I forget what they called them, but they were too valuable to, you know, get in the Army. But nearly all of my father's friends served some place in World War II, I mean nearly everybody did. You know, the post office guy was in the raid over Ploesti. My band leader was an infantryman in the Battle of the Bulge, and you know, one of the coaches was a bombardier, you know. And so, you know I came from that generation, I'm a child of what they call the greatest generation, and so my family didn't think it, I guess, that extraordinary. My father wasn't alive, my father died when I was twelve, so it was my mother. But, uh, there's just, you just got to remember back in those days, there was, people felt a sense of responsibility to their country and I went to Davidson, and it was this sort of idea that part of your education, you know if you're going to be a lawyer, or if you're going to be a politician, or you're going to be company director, was that you serve your country as a military officer. That you did your duty, and so, you know, and you know, we were in the south. We weren't, we weren't really involved in a lot of the radical changes at the time. You know, I was telling somebody the other day, you know, I was at Davidson... 1963, 1964. On that lunch calendar, stuff was going on up in North Carolina, and all this stuff was going on down in Birmingham, and you know, we were just little college guys wearing our Izod shirts and our khakis, and our Wigeons without socks, you know. Its, you know, the country was kind of insulated from all that. *(Pause)*. My family was... disturbed when

they found out I was going to Vietnam. You know, I think I'm, I may be the... maybe one of 2 or 3 people from my entire high school, I went to one of the big sort of consolidated schools, that wound up in Vietnam. You know, everybody did other stuff. You know, they got married, or they farmed, or you know, yeah. But, you know, I was a reader, and I read a great deal about World War I. And, you know, the people like Robert Graves, and Siegfried Sassoon, Edmund Blunden. It was this idea that you should, if you were a member of the governing class like us. If you were educated, if you had a good bit of money, that you shouldn't make other people go. If other people were going to go, you had to, you know the British say: Do your bit.

David Bice: You mentioned that you were and ROTC Officer. What part of the military did you go into, and what position did you start with and end with?

Dr. Beidler: That's interesting. Davidson was kind of like here. It was called a land grant college, and it came back from in the Civil War when various colleges were given money if they agreed to start an officers training program. And nearly everybody, at Davidson in those days, do you know a whole lot about it?

David Bice: Not a whole lot.

Dr. Beidler: It's a sort of elite men's school. In the south it'd be like... it's like Amherst, or Williams. A men's school, and the first two years ROTC were mandatory because we were a land grant school, and that was part of it: that all students had to do a certain amount of military training. But, you know, toward the mid to late 60s Vietnam was stirring up, they were starting to take people, and a lot of people just felt, if I got to go, I'd rather go as a Lieutenant than a Private, so a lot of people took senior ROTC. What I found very interesting, people were pretty clueless when they're our age (here he is referring to the age he was in college) you don't think you're clueless, but you'll find out, you know, thirty years from now, geeze I was clueless. There were guys, there were cool guys at the University, at Davidson that were ROTC jocks. You know, Cadet Battalion Commander (name). And these were cool guys, you know, and I'm thinking, what are they doing this dipshit stuff for? Well, the reason is because they're going to be distinguished military graduates. And they're going the United States Embassy in France. Or they're going to the Fulda Gap in Germany. And my little ass is going to the Cambodian border, because the only thing that I liked was field training. I felt that, I thought that, you know, the ROTC drill was just dipshit stuff, so. But that's how I wound up there. My branch of the Army was the Armored Cavalry, which is a sort of sub category of Armor, of tanks, and the Armored Cavalry are sort of the scouts of the armored divisions. They're sort of the picket lines, and the Armored Cavalry is designed to get the first contact, and the deal was to hold off the enemy until the big guys could come, because you had vehicles that were maneuverable. You had light tanks, and ACAV's and stuff. But you had enough fire power to maybe hold them off until, you know. But a lot of the missions were sort of reconnaissance, or trying to go out... It was just trying to go out and get somebody to shoot at us. And then just call in the wrath of God, you know. Call in artillery, and helicopters, and jet aircraft. But as it turns out, I was trained for that here in the United States, and in the 6th Cavalry at Fort (name of military fort). And then, that's the assignment I got in Vietnam, which was kind of unusual. Usually the Army would screw you some way like that, but I was trained for what I did. And when I got there, I felt competent. I didn't feel confident, well yeah, I did feel confident, but if I could stand up to it emotionally, you know. That you never know until you go into combat, but if I could stand up to it that way. I

knew I could do the other stuff. I knew I could call artillery, I knew I could maneuver, I could, you know. It's a pretty complicated unit, because you got ACAVs, you got tanks, you got a track that's got a mortar on it. You've got a track that's got infantry with it. I mean its like running a whole combined operations outfit, so you kind of got to know what you're doing, but it worked.

David Bice: You mentioned in your books that you were a platoon leader. Did you start as one, or did you work your way up during the war?

Dr. Beidler: No, that was my assignment, that was my first assignment, and I spent the first half of my tour as a platoon leader basically busting jungle, and ambushing, and we did convoy escort, road blocks, we did night ambushed, but then the second half I was what they called an Executive Officer, *the* Executive Officer. In the Armored Cavalry you've got a platoon. In the infantry the next one up from a platoon is a company. In the Armored Cavalry they call it a troop. It comes from the old cavalry days. So you got a platoon, a troop, then you got what they call a squadron, then you got a regiment, but you know usually a platoon leader was taken out of the field, kind of used up. And I was made the Executive Officer of the troop, which meant I was second in command. One of my jobs was if the commander got killed I had to take over, I had to go in there. But mainly I made sure the, I spent the second half flying in a lot of helicopters taking out supplies and gas, and ammunition and things. I'd hook up these sling loads to these big chinook helicopters hovering right over my head, and they'd lift them out, but I basically lived out of my jeep while I was doing that. I would go to various firebases.

David Bice: When you first got to Vietnam, what was the general air, or consensus, or how did everybody feel being there?

Dr. Beidler: That was actually your sort of first disconcerting moment because you would fly in on this civilian airplane, stewardesses and inflight meals and all that. And I still remember, the door opens, the plane door opens and we were still, most of us were still wearing khakis. We don't get out jungle fatigues until we get to our unit. And I remember the heat just coming up my knees and up my hips and all that. So we're at this like landing area where we're all supposed to go sit over on these benches. Well there's right beside it there's a whole other area with benches, and there are a bunch of other guys who are about to get on your plane, and they're going home. They're at the end of their tours. And they're screaming things at you: "Noobie, you're gonna die, you're going home in a body bag,". It's not encouraging, but that's how they did it. The plane would stay on the ground for about 15, 30 minutes. You can unload a bunch of, they call us FNGs: Fucking New Guys, a bunch of new guys would get off and just, you know, these guys who had done their tours would go home. But then you went to, I went to a place as did everybody. It's called the 90th replacement detachment. It was this place you sort of hung out until they figured out what your unit assignment was going to be. And they would just do, there was no rhyme or reason to it. Who needed Lieutenants? For instance, Hamburger Hill was going on when I got there, and I thought, Oh shit. You know, even though I'm Armored Cavalry, they need infantry Lieutenants, and if you've got combat training they don't care. If you're an artillery lieutenant or an Armored Cavalry lieutenant. If they need infantry lieutenants that's what you're going to be. But I fortunately I got, you know, this assignment to an Armored Cavalry troop.

David Bice: You mentioned that a tour in Vietnam is a whole year, 365 days. Were there people who made multiple tours, or was it always just the one?

Dr. Beidler: No, there were officers often, who made multiple tours because that was the route to quick promotion. Combat assignments and decorations, and so, and many of us are West Pointers and could make at least two tours. Higher officers like majors and lieutenant colonels and, they tried to get, it's called getting your ticket punched. Like if you are a lieutenant colonel, battalion command was like a box you had to check. The problem with that was that the six-month tour, I mean the six-month command assignment: about six months you're just getting pretty good at what you do. I mean you don't burn out for a while yet. You burn out maybe 8 months, 9 months where you just go, "Shit". Just when a guy's getting good, they take him out and bring somebody else in. The non commissioned officers, the sergeants did multiple tours whether they wanted to or not, and one of the problems of the war, particularly toward the end was that we'd used up all our NCOs. Our Senior NCOs. You know what an NCO is? A sergeant. So, you got a three-stripe sergeant, you got a buck sergeant. You got a sergeant first class, and you got a E-7 platoon sergeant, whom I had. I mean I had, I had terrific sergeants. And then you got the master sergeant, the first sergeant, the sergeant major, and you know there's only a limited number of those career guys. And by the time I got to Vietnam, they were pretty well used up. And I was very lucky that my unit still had, I mean over in the infantry you were having private first class leading a squad where it should have been a buck sergeant. But there were, those were the people who did multiple tours. And then there were crazy bastards. Like LRRPs, and special operations guys. Sneaky Petes we called them.

David Bice: What's LRRP?

Dr. Beidler: Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol. Just, go out there for five, go out there for five day. Just VC and NVA all around, trying to figure out how to call an airstrike on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Or trying to, trying to snatch a North Vietnamese or Viet Cong soldier for intelligence. Those guys just love that shit. They'd be in Cambodia, or they'd be up in Laos, but you know, if they got caught or they got captured, the CIA would say, "We don't know anything about this, we don't know who these guys were". They often carried weapons that were not traceable, they carried Swedish K-machine guns, or they carried AK-47s, like the communist rifle. They couldn't be traced. We just called them snake eaters, or sneaky Petes, and they were guys that just got high on that shit, and they just loved the war, and they kept going back. They got sort of crazy on it.

David Bice: Speaking of the Viet Cong, in the modern day they've been almost mythologized as these like, really scary, super competent troops that just came out of nowhere. What was the reality of that? How was that on a day to day basis?

Dr. Beidler: That was really, that's pretty accurate. There were Viet Cong who were sort of in the villages, they were sort of small groups. But there were then by '68, '69: Tet. There were entire main force regiments by then. And of course, by that time, there were lots of North Vietnamese, actually Army. You know, we had the VC, but you had the NVA too. The North Vietnamese regulars were, they were real tough guys. And the VC, you know I said the main force regiments. And they could hit and run, and they could sort of decide to engage you or not. And toward the end of the war you know, they would engage a unit like mine and they would, it was called holding the enemy by the belt. In the, early in the war they would engage us and we would pull back and pound them. Really kill a lot of them with aircraft and all that. Well they wised up to that, and they, once they engaged us, it was called hold them by the

belt, they'd get as close as they could to us so if we called in an airstrike it would come in on us too. You know, people said, "The night belonged to Charlie," and it did, you know that's what we called them: Victor Charlie. The night belongs to Charlie. And it really did, particularly out in the villages. They'd just, the Viet Cong would come out at night and come right back to the villages. We did not win hearts and minds in Vietnam. You can take a sniper round from, some people would, I wouldn't, you know, you could take a sniper round from a village and call an artillery strike on it. You don't care how many civilians you kill. And if, you know, there used to be a saying, "If they're dead, they're VC,". But they were good. They had a motivation that we didn't. They wanted to get foreigners out of their country. They were nationalists. I mean they were communists, but Ho Chi Minh chose communism as really the closest political system to the way the Vietnamese culture worked, which was the village, the province, and you know, that was very smart. The other thing was, with the hit and run stuff in the south, they could choose when to fight and when not to fight. I mean a typical engagement we'd be busting jungle, or you know. And suddenly an RPG, a Rocket Propelled Grenade, would take out one of your tracks. Or one of your tracks would run over a command detonated 155-millimeter shell, you know a landmine, and all of a sudden you got three guys wounded, and you got maybe one guy killed, and I mean you never saw them. And you know so you got to stop, you got to call in medivac, you got to call in a dust off, and you know, by that time they're long gone. They're ditty bopping back across the Cambodian border. Very frustrating.

David Bice: How do you think that influenced American Military Doctrine?

Dr. Beidler: Oh, it made it very destructive. The only people that were on our side were the Saigon government, and the generals who were making money hand over fist over American support. The poor little privates and ARVNs, the Army of Vietnam, you know, they were not motivated. That's why we Americans went in there, you know, because they wouldn't fight. They wanted us to do it for them. The longer the war went, I mean if you had a village that was sort of, you know, we're part of the Republic of Vietnam, so you take a sniper, like I said, you take a sniper round, or you go through the village and you find a cache of rice in there that their clearly saving for the Vietnamese, or you find buried weapons or something like that: you burn the village, right? And suddenly, so you got 300 more people whose hearts and minds you've lost. You know what I'm saying? They don't want to see you. And that was, you know, that went by various names. It was pacification. Winning hearts and minds. That just didn't happen, you know.

David Bice: You mentioned that the South Vietnamese weren't very motivated. How was motivation on the American side?

Dr. Beidler: It depends on when. You ever seen we were soldiers? That was when we went in there, you know, we were going to kick ass and take names. The 1st Cavalry. Almost all the units that went, that deployed as units had this sort of spree (spry? Spelling?). This sort of high confidence, you know. The 9th Division, the 1st Division: The Big Red One, 25th Division: Tropic Lightning. And then the light brigades, the 173rd Light Brigade, and mine, the 199th Light Brigade which were specially designed for Vietnam. Like find the bastards and pile on. We were light infantry and we could really move in a hurry. And so you know, we had a certain kind of spree. I'd say it started declining after Tet. You know, people started thinking, "what in the... Jesus four years," I will say this, and I'll never forget it, and I think it's important for other people to remember: we eventually went from sort of a volunteer force to a almost completely draftee or conscript soldiers, and boy those were good soldiers. I don't care where they came from, they were Hispanic, and they were black, and they were blue collar guys, you know the dignity and the patience. I just loved my troops, I just... a war shows you what you're made of and these guys just wouldn't let you down. And they wouldn't let each other down, they had that sort of dignity to them, and I've never forgotten that. So, I mean, they weren't fire eaters, they weren't going to go out and do crazy

shit, but you know, what is the saying? "Choose kids to fight a war, they can hump the hills and they don't take it personally."

David Bice: Could you clarify what you meant by Hump the Hills.

Dr. Beidler: Yeah. Walk. Bust jungle. Go out there day after day. It's exhausting. Half the year it's hot, and it's dry, and then half the year it's wet and it's muddy, but you know the jungle is just, you know it's triple canopy jungle. That's why we used to call it busting jungle. Sometimes you'd have to cut your own trail with a machete, and I mean you're carrying, I mean in the Armored Cavalry of course we were carrying stuff on out tracks, but you'd go out on ambush and you're carrying stuff. You'd go out on patrol from maybe dawn to dusk on a given day, and then you'd night ambush. I mean, you'd wind up getting 2 or 3 hours sleep a night, and you go on for 6 weeks, 2 months like that before you get a rest you know, and you'd just get really tired.

David Bice: You mentioned earlier, and you mentioned just now how you loved your troops and you mentioned earlier how you had great NCOs. In general, how was the interaction and the relationship between the officers and the enlisted?

Dr. Beidler: Very good, again, until after Tet. Which Tet was really, Tet was February 1968, was, I got there a year after that. I got there for what they called second Tet. Tet, you know what the Tet Offensive was? When they attacked all over the country, I mean they secretly moved big regiments in, and the fact that they could do that tells you something about whose side the people were on. And after Tet, you know the American states, the American line was that we just slaughtered them, which we did. There's an interesting theory that the North Vietnamese actually staged the Tet Offensive so that the VC in the south... You know what they difference is? The NVA were the North Vietnamese and the VC were the communist fighters in the south. But there's a theory that the northern communists actually staged the Tet Offensive so they could get as many VC in the south killed off as they possibly can so that when they came in, they were going to be in charge. So, but we did. God, we killed so many Vietnamese: VC, NVA, but the problem was, was the propaganda victory, in the United States you're getting news reels and you're seeing VC taking over the United States Embassy in Vietnam, and you know, and after that people started thinking, "Eh, I've got 365 days here, I'm going to save my ass," so that kind of motivation. What motivates a soldier is relationships with other soldiers. What motivates a soldier is the fear that you are going to let somebody else down, you just don't want to do that, and that's motivation enough for most people. You know, nobody was talking about, "We're going to make to the world safe for democracy," or, "The Commies are coming ashore in San Diego," we wound up fighting for each other. It's a strange relationship that a lot of people don't have otherwise. Your friendships are so deep that, sure you'd die for someone else. That's just the kind of, it's unqualified, it's unconditional. Some guy knows that if he gets wounded, you're going to go out there and get him. It's a kind of bonding thing.

David Bice: You talked about a propaganda victory. How was, when you came home, how was the reception? How did people, at that time, back home feel about the war.

Dr. Beidler: They wanted the war to end. There were activist people, and there were political people that really wanted the war to end. They had these big marches in Washington. I never knew anybody who got spit on. I never got called a baby killer. The more important thing was that you came home one by one by one, and nobody wanted to hear about it. So, you were just sentenced to silence. Nobody wanted to know that you were a soldier in Vietnam. They didn't want to think about that, so you know you didn't have much, you felt very isolated. I just went to graduate school. Back to graduate school in English. I had a Master's in English before I went to Vietnam. And I went and I got my G.I. Bill at the University of Virginia, and I went back to graduate school and I just threw myself into my studies and my books, you

know I had a carrel (a desk with walls around the table. Similar to a small cubicle.) in the library, you know, I lived out in the country, it was just kind of solitary, and I got over it after a while.

David Bice: Earlier you asked me if I had seen *We Were Soldiers*, and also in your book: *Late Thoughts on an Old War* you have a chapter on a movie called *Platoon*. What is it like for you to see these movies come out one after another, and how accurate are the depictions?

Dr. Beidler: You know, I felt that, in a certain way, that I had to see them. That I had to face that. That I couldn't run away from that. I remember seeing *Apocalypse Now*. I thought the *Deer Hunter* was terrible. Just phony, *Russian Roulette*, and all that. Did you ever see *Full Metal Jacket*? Well that's, poor Marines. That's what happens to the Marines. The most accurate film for me is *Platoon*. Those are the kinds of things that happened. To my platoon, and other platoons. They didn't all happen to one platoon, if you follow me. But if you want to know what it was like, you know just the Humping and the terror. You know obviously the two sergeants: the demonic sergeant and the angelic sergeant, that was phonied up stuff, but I thought Charlie Sheen did a really good job in that movie, you know, as a draftee. But if you just want to know how miserable it was, *Platoon's* your book. Or your movie.

David Bice: Actually, speaking of books, you also mentioned something that you call *Viet Pulp*, just book after book after book coming out. What about this particular war has it so centered in the American consciousness? Why are there so many books, and so many movies that come out about this one?

Dr. Beidler: Well that's a good question. At the time, most of us felt, and that's whether we were soldiers, veterans, or whether we were people who had stayed at home and demonstrated against the war, that we finally got our comeuppance. This idea that we were the redeemer nation. This idea that we were always the good guys. We thought that we had put that to rest. You know, we lost that war. We got our asses kicked. And the French had gotten their asses kicked before that. Like I remark in the book, the one thing we should have learned, if nothing else: that a 3000-year-old Asian culture, really, deep down inside doesn't want to be a 200-year-old American democracy. We have this business of American exceptionalism, and "We can't be militarily defeated,". Well we can. And we have been, and we shouldn't make wars like that. And particularly when we kill so many. We killed between 2 and 4 million Vietnamese.

David Bice: How many of those do you think were actual combatants?

Dr. Beidler: It's hard to say. We'll never know, because like I said body count. See if you can't hold land, like in World War II, you came ashore in France, and so you'd take, you know, you'd eventually take Bordeaux, or Cherbourg, and you'd run the Germans out, and you'd occupy. You know, in Vietnam our worst, our worst battle and you read about it, the day the General was killed. That took place on a stretch of road that I'd been driving my Jeep for six months. By myself. And my driver, who was a crazy son of a bitch. But you know, I'm the Executive Officer. You know, going from this battalion to this battalion, making sure that I'm with the troop, flying helicopters out there. So, I've been going down this road, dusty road, in my Jeep with my driver for, I don't know, three months. And all of sudden we go down the road as a troop and the entire 274D North Vietnamese regiment is waiting for us. And the killing zone is 500 meters long. That's a big ambush. And the only way we got out of there was just by pounding them... to death. We'd call in artillery and the artillery would lift. And then the gunships would come in, the gunships would leave, and the jets out of the Air Force, you know, bombs and napalm would come out of Ben Wa. I could remember the heat on my face. That's how close it was, and we just pounded them for ten hours. And eventually they decide, I don't know, they decide they killed enough of us, or they took some losses. That's the way, that's the way it was. The soldiers, I never saw the soldiers behave better than in that ambush. It's sort of, you know that Charlie Sheen, you know that firebase thing at the end? You know Oliver Stone was involved in that. He was in one of the battalions, and one of my friends,

Larry Heinemann, he was in the other battalion and just. If you would like to read a book that's really about the Armored Cavalry read "Close Quarters" by Larry Heinemann. (Dr. Beidler spells the name). It's called "Close Quarters". It's about tracks, you know. Armored Cavalry. Mechanized Infantry.

David Bice: Like I mentioned earlier about how the Viet Cong had been sort of mythologized and spread through media, there's some things about the military that have been mythologized and just kind of accepted (as true), and I figured I could ask you for the truth of the matter. Did you have any lucky charms or just things that you kept on you for good luck? Or did you know anybody who did? Anything like that?

Dr. Beidler: Oh yeah. People would get stuff from home: Oatmeal cookies, pictures of their girlfriends, or they'd wear an ace of spades in their helmet band. I mean, yeah you got superstitious after a little while. My sort of magic object was my jungle hat. My floppy hat. Which I just, I just never lost it. I felt like if I had my jungle hat on, I was bulletproof. So yeah, everybody had sort of little fetishes (a charm, or talisman believed to have special properties) like that. You always check to make sure all your shit was in the right place. Your map, signal operating instructions. I had a .45 in a shoulder holster. But then I had an M79 grenade launcher, but you know you just always made sure you got all your shit.

David Bice: And then is there just a general story that you remember that really, kind of defined your time in Vietnam?

Dr. Beidler: Well, I think that story of that real battle, that real slugfest. Where the general got killed and we lost all those guys, we lost 15, 20 guys that day. And, we sort of made up our mind around noontime. My commanding officer, I flew into this damn thing at 8 o'clock in the morning bringing in machine gun barrels because they'd burnt out all of their machine gun barrels. If you fire too much through a machine gun, it gets red hot and it basically melts. And so, I was bringing in a load of machine gun barrels on a Huey, on one of the helicopters. And the other reason I was coming in was because I had gotten a message, an incorrect message, that Mike Doyle, my troop commander had been killed in that ambush, and part of the deal was if you were the Executive Officer, that's one of your jobs is to take over if the commander is killed. You're second in command. So, I flew in, and I looked, I hit, I flopped down on the ground, everybody said, "Get down, get down!" They're shooting at the helicopter. I finally get up and run and here's Mike. He's big as life, he's doing Mike. He was a big man, good man. But I was there, and I was not coming out, so I was there for the day. It's still, I think of it as my moment of truth. I mean we'd sort of made up our minds around noontime that we were probably going to be overrun. They estimated that there were probably 750 NVA in this unit. This big long killing zone. And there were about 40, 45 of us. And what saved us of course was artillery and air power, and by evening they were gone. It was eerie. I rode the last Sheridan out of there at twilight. It was just me, and the driver and the gunner and all that. We stayed there 'til everybody got out, and then we turned around and left. But that was, at a certain point you accept that you really might die. You start: "It won't happen to me. It will happen to somebody else." And at a certain point you say, "It could happen to me," and at a certain point you say, "It probably will happen to me,". And once you get to that point you kind of don't give a shit anymore, or you just do what you do. And that was sort of my moment of truth.

David Bice: Was there anything that you learned by being in that war that you want other people to know, that weren't involved.

Dr. Beidler: Yes, and it's not just being in the war, but being in the Army. You learn how to soldier. Learning how to do what you got to do. I think I've had a very successful career. You know, I had an endowed share in the English Department, and I've written a lot of books gotten a lot of honors. Travelled everywhere, I've had a wonderful career. I've been to Prague, and I've been to Berlin. They sent me to Havana twice when nobody was going there. Been to London. I've been to Vienna, been to Beijing. And I

think one of the reasons that has happened is because I've just been sort of steady. My career in the University, I've done sort of the same thing that I'd have done had I been in the army. You learn how to soldier. You don't piss and moan, you don't say "I can't do that". You just make up your mind and do it. And the other thing is you really cherish the trust of friends and colleagues. You understand what I mean by knowing how to soldier? Yeah. And I think that's made all the difference for me.

David Bice: Well you have covered all of the questions that I have. Is there anything else that you'd like to share?

Dr. Beidler: No, I think your questions were great, and I feel as if we have gotten a pretty good picture of, maybe I hope, what you were looking for.

David Bice: I was looking for your story, and if you feel like you've told that then I've got what I'm looking for.

Dr. Beidler: Well that's my story, and... what do they say? "That's my story and I'm sticking to it." But you know, but I come from another generation now as I say. I'm a son, I am one of the children of World War II, of the Greatest Generation, and I think that my values were those of that generation, and it just never seemed queer to me, even though I went to very elite colleges, and I knew people who were opposed to the war, that if your country called you to duty... We used to believe that our country wouldn't lie to us. Can you believe that?

David Bice: I don't know anybody who still believes that.

Dr. Beidler: No, and this might give you just a bit more background. I grew up in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. My mother was a Quaker, my father was descended from Mennonites, I mean we were a plain people, and pacifists, but you know I grew up as sort of the establishment. What would you call it? The governing classes. I grew up with the Eisenhower grandchildren. I was around Eisenhower a good bit. I'd see him at the golf course, or I'd see him in Church, and you know, and then in college we were all sort of seduced by the Kennedy Mystique. A new generation, and the Green Berets and that thing. So, you know I had this kind of double dose of duty. Of duty, of honor, of country, and it's just never bothered me that I did this. I am at peace with it. And now, it's interesting we do have a lot of people in ROTC, it's kind of getting more popular and all that. Right after I got back from Vietnam, they were running ROTCs off of college campuses and all that. It was just a different time, and a different place. You owe your country. It's your duty, and so I've always just sort of seen it that way. I really believe in the Citizen Soldier.

David Bice: Actually, coming from that I did have one more question. You talk about how it was a time of duty to your country, and how it just didn't seem weird to you, but I remember in one of your books you talked about how these days politicians are scared to even mention the draft. Do you think that will ever change, and how do you feel on that subject?

Dr. Beidler: We get into a big enough war and the Draft will be instated. It means if we get in a land war with China. Or if Russia comes through the Fulda Gap you know. But I think conscription is a good thing. Fair. You know when they finally brought in the lottery... I thought the Draft lottery was the best thing they did, because otherwise it was working with people of color, and with poor people, and rural people, and inner-city people. You'd be surprised how many farm boys you got out of Iowa and Minnesota. But I just couldn't believe what they did sometimes. You know, they came from a place where they knew how to fix a tractor or something, and you know you'd be up in a terrible place and you'd just thrown a track on a (unknown) or the track came off, and you had to figure out how to put it back on, and there's a kid from Iowa that's saying, "Ahhh, you gotta take that little bit to the right man," and so, you learn that those

people are really worthy human beings. We still have a draft, it's just by other means. It's called the All-Volunteer Army. And its poor people. And people of color. And it's guys that couldn't get a job, and it's guys that flunked out of junior college, or it's guys that don't have money for college and are taking a risk that three years in the Army will get them educational benefits. It's still just grunts. But I've got such a warm place in my heart for grunts you wouldn't believe it. And like I say they can Hump the Hills and they don't take it personally.

David Bice: Did you keep up with anybody after the war?

Dr. Beidler: Yeah, actually people started catching up with each other. Mike and I, my Captain, he was a Captain I was a First Lieutenant, He and I were very close. And, ah just to give you an example. There was a three tour E-7, that's Sergeant First Class, up in Warrior Alabama, a guy named Neil Cater. Who found out I was having a heart operation, this Fall. And I was really, really sick, and he came over before daylight of my operation, and he didn't leave until that night when I'd wake up and he figured I was okay. But there are, there's actually a group, of D troop. Almost an alumni association, and you know they go up to Washington, the day that all the troops go up to the wall. Vietnam Remembrance Day, and they have bikers, you know that Rolling Thunder thing they do. And there have been reunions, and I've been invited to come by the enlisted, but Mike and I, and one of the other platoon leaders and a bunch of the sergeants, we still look after each other.