

Major James Capers Jr. Oral History Interview

October 30, 2014

Interviewed by Jerrod Howe

Howe: It begins with me just saying, today is Thursday, October the 30th, 2014. My name is Jared Howe and we're here at the Pritzker Military Museum and Library, downtown Chicago, and I'm here with Major Capers and we're here to tell your story. Thank you for coming in today.

Capers: Thanks for inviting me.

Howe: It's kind of- it's a bit of an honor after having read some of, just a little bit of where you've been and what you've done, so. If we can, like I said, we'll just start at the beginning. When and where were you born?

Capers: Not sure. Not the answer you wanted, but I was probably born in South Carolina, because there's no official record of where I was born. Back in the '30's when I was born, they didn't keep very good records of African Americans, and I was probably delivered by a midwife who probably didn't keep records of that and I was the last child to be born. The first child was also named James Capers Junior. My father was James Capers Senior. The first child was born was a male child named James Capers Junior. He passed away and the family renamed me James Capers Junior. So I'm the second James Capers Junior, and I have no idea exactly where I was born. I went back to South Carolina, to the County Clerk's office to see if we could find any records and they have no records of a James Capers Junior born when I thought I was born. This was not unusual back in the South for African American citizens. It was not a pleasant time. So I was born in South Carolina, somewhere, specific date, I don't know. But after I joined the Marines, the FBI did a background search and they figured out that I was probably born during this time and allowed my records to stand based on what the neighbors said and different people said, friends said. So they put that together and gave me a date of 25 August, 1937. I have no birth certificate. It's a long way around, but that's, was not uncommon back in the rural South.

Howe: And already you have an interesting story.

Capers: (Laughs)

Howe: What did your parents do for a living?

Capers: We were sharecroppers. We were farmers. We picked cotton, cropped tobacco, worked in the fields, and pretty much the things that were some years out of slavery. My great grandfather was born a slave, from Africa, was brought to, probably to South Carolina and put in a dungeon until someone bought him and that was the beginning of the Capers family. It's just some oral histories of family members telling me this, but we had rural skills. My father was a generous man and after farming for some years, my mother took in washing and different things for white families. And apparently somewhere along the line there was an altercation and my father was put on something called the "chain gang." And after he was released from the chain gang, there was another family, who - white family, who were more than generous to us. And I was sick, we had already lost four children, and I was sick, probably was going to die from the same disease that killed the other four. And this family came and got me and took me to live with them. And as a result of that, obviously I survived and I was brought back to my family. My father left South Carolina, went to Baltimore, Maryland, and mostly avoiding the, such as we know it today, the justice system. And I would surmise that that family who helped me was probably part of that operation that got him out of South Carolina and on into Baltimore. And eventually, again I would surmise, that this family who helped me earlier, was able to help my mother and my three other siblings get to Baltimore. My mother could not drive, we were young people, so it begs the question: how did we get there? How were we reunited with my father? Somewhere along the line, someone of good nature made these things happen and they were probably white citizens, because no one that I knew was able to do such things. So I've always been grateful for, and I don't even know their names. I have no real serious memories. I think sometimes I remember who they were, but as a child, you know, I don't know for sure. But I do believe that they were good-natured people who saw a family, didn't really matter what color they were, who they prayed to, they stepped in and did the right thing. I'm the product of that. I survived because of that. I'm the last remaining member of that family. I have no living relatives. All my brothers and sisters are gone, my parents are gone, and all my aunts and uncles are gone, so I'm down to the wire now. I'm it. I lost my wife in 2009; I lost my son in 2003. So here I am to tell you the, the story of the Capers family during those years. Probably didn't get it all right, but as I remember it.

Howe: So you moved back to Bal- You moved up to Baltimore to be with your father. Do you recall what- how old you were at the time?

Capers: Well, we don't really know. I was placed into a school in Baltimore based on what I looked like and what I was able to comprehend. I was probably a little older than you would be for the kindergarten or something like that. Because I was in the South and we brought up there and the school system put you where they thought that you would best fit in. And there was probably some sort of operation where they would move you up a grade or move you back a grade, depends on what you would needed. But I have

very few memories of some of that. But eventually, you know, I was in the school system there and did fairly well and graduated high school there and joined the Marines out of high school there.

Howe: That's a lot to put together.

Capers: Yeah, it is.

Howe: Before the move to Baltimore, what do you recall about living in the Carolinas?

Capers: It was a wonderful time, I mean, when you're a child, you know. I didn't know that cotton and, picking cotton, those long cotton sacks. I remember people singing in the fields, I remember how hot it was, how hard the work was, but I had nothing to compare it to. So if it was hard work, that's okay, didn't know the difference. And we raised cotton, cropped tobacco, we had the hogs and, you know, farm animals. And I learned to milk the cows and slop the hogs and those type of things and it was a joyous time, we had plenty of food and, and I enjoyed the Southern delicacies, the strawberries and the blackberries and the blueberries and the figs on the trees and so it was a wonderful time. People sang a lot, they were very kind. I was not aware to- I couldn't understand any segregation because I didn't see it. I had nothing to compare it to. But it, I'm sure it existed, but on the other side there were people who were generous and kind who didn't look at me, didn't look at the color of my skin. They did the right thing. And because they came and got me and cured me then brought me back to my family, I can't see prejudice because they were not prejudice. I'm sure there are other cases where it was not that way. I know about the horror stories. I know about all of that, and history is very replete with all that type of stuff, but I didn't see it so I can't really comment on things that we've settled a long time ago. We settled that. Got a ways to go yet, we're not there yet and I know that, but I'm looking at the positive side.

Howe: What was, what else do you recall about that community? You say it was joyous, there was...

Capers: Yeah, I had aunts and uncles, and a family. And, you know, I didn't know my grandparents, because you know farms were located quite a ways away. And I remember getting on a big wagon on Saturday or whenever it was, and going to town and, you know, into town, that's- Such as I remember, I didn't know that the town was segregated. I couldn't go into certain places, but I was never aware of the option. I did what I was told to do, what I had learned to do, but for me it was a time of great euphoria. It was a kind, loving family. I had brothers and sisters and as I grew older, those memories became the fun memories. We all talked about how good it was down home, back down home, and when I got to Baltimore, it wasn't always that good either, so we reminisced about the good old days. It was always the good old days even though the good old days were not always so good, but as you grow up and have something to compare it with, you know. I remember when they dropped the bombs on Pearl Harbor

you know, at least close to that particular time, you know. All those things that as a child you don't remember directly but you hear certain things, and you retain those memories, you know. Maybe you can't read it in the newspaper, had no television. We had radios back in those days but very few people could afford, certainly the Black folks couldn't afford radios. So there was oral histories; sitting down, talking to my aunts and my uncles who told me other stories to compare with what my family told me. And you developed this great feeling for religion; that God is going to save us all. We prayed and we believed in God. It's going to be a better day, one of these days it's going to be a better day. All you have to do is hold on. So we believed in those things and we didn't have an education system. There were some churches around but most of what we learned about our religion was, again, oral history, the same things you're doing now. Except we were not recording it, we were remembering it. And you know, we talked about the Bible but from a rudimentary point of view. And I heard those things and I saw things that I compared with the teachings in the Bible. I actually witnessed that. As I said, this family who came in and said, 'I'll lay down my life to save this Black child. If I'm caught, maybe something would happen to me, but that doesn't matter now. Here's a child in need and I'm going to put aside whatever threats, I'm going to do the right thing,' and I lived because of that. Now, how did it get to that point? What was it, their religious beliefs? Was it just that they were good hearts, or what did they see that a good part of the country didn't see? I often wondered about that through the years. What made them do this? Someone came and got me and took me to their home and fed me. Someone had to feed me, someone spoke to me. I do remember my uncle saying that when I- they brought me back, when the white family brought me back to my family, that I was speaking sort of a different language. Now I don't know, it's probably something I heard. I've always had a pretty good memory, at least at that time, and whatever was going on in this home around me, I was beginning to absorb this. And somebody tucked me in bed at night, someone feed me, someone held my hand, someone did that, it was- that I didn't know. And I heard the things they were talking, I heard the, the language they were speaking. It was not something that I was familiar with. But I guess I began to absorb that and when I came back to my family, my aunts and uncles told me that I was speaking something in a little different than they knew. So how all this happened, I don't know. And when I went back to my family, I moved on to Baltimore and these things became memories. And through the years, they've become good memories because it reaffirmed my belief, my- and faith in man, of man. I experienced that. I know how good people can be, also how cruel people can be and I've suffered some of that also. But the goodness was instilled in me before some of the horrors of the war and other things that I experienced. So I tend to hold on to those things. There were days when I was challenged. And I began to forget about this family and thought about somebody else who said the wrong thing to me or tried to treat me cruelly. But I had this good thing to hold on to now and I'm not going to let the negative thing take away what I know to be true. So those are things you try to compare. There's always good and evil.

Howe: Some say you can't have one without the other.

Capers: Well, that, my family always said, "If the devil feeds you rocks, you feed him bread." Very simplistic point of view.

Howe: You mentioned your siblings. How, how many siblings did you have, in total?

Capers: Don't know. The first James Capers Junior, as I said, died with- four of the siblings died. There was eight of us, far as I know. And four died, and probably of early childhood diseases, something that would be cured today. Then there were four others: my older brother, whose name was Roosevelt; and my middle brother, John, who we called John Henry; then I had a sister named Rosalie, who was allegedly named after my, my grandmother, whom I didn't know or my grandfather. I have no memories of my grandmother, my grandfather. Might have met them somewhere along the line, but I have no memories of that. But that- and I was the last child to be born and was renamed James Capers Junior. It was probably the names of the ones who passed away. I was told that there was a set of twins somewhere in there but they passed away also. So I've never been able to fully document this. As I told you, I went back to South, South Carolina to see if I could find out, number one, who that family was that took me in and no luck. I tried to find a birth certificate and no luck. So they gave me a letter stating that they did the research but there's no record of a James Capers Junior being born at that time. They gave me a letter, I paid them twelve bucks, and that's all I have as far as a birth certificate.

Howe: What do you remember about the, the move from Carolina to Maryland?

Capers: You know, I'm not sure how much I remember, don't remember. My father left us in an old T-Model Ford and I remember the last night I saw him. And there was four of us children left and my mother there, who was a young mother, and had the children, you know, a lot of children back in those days. Families had the children because the more kids you have, the more work you could do in the fields. It made, made sense back in those days. I remember my father leaving, he hugged all of us, and hugged my mother and he walked out. My father was a huge man and he walked out the door and looked around, then he walked outside into the night. And I heard the car come to life and there was somebody in the car. And they went down the old country road, that was the last time I saw him until we moved on to Baltimore. There was, wasn't much sadness because I didn't know where he was going, he didn't know where he was going, he'd never been to Baltimore. As a young man, it must have been traumatic for him. He's getting into a car in the middle of the night, going to a place called Baltimore, which he'd never been to and didn't know anybody there, how would he live? He wasn't an educated man. Obviously he'd been in a little trouble, they'd put him on the chain gang, which probably wasn't that hard to do back in those days. I remember he had been shot. I remember seeing the bullet hole in his leg, but what led to that, I don't

know. But it, I often thought, what he was thinking as he left his family behind and went on to a place that he had no idea where it was. How would he survive? But he did survive and somehow, again I would think that the family who helped me out must have had something to do with it. It just makes sense that there was something going on like the old Underground Railroad you know back in those days. Not like it was in the 18th century, but somewhere along the line something, happened and I wished I knew what that process was. And many times I've thought about it. When he went from South Carolina, you know, through North Carolina, Virginia, on to Baltimore, who took him in? What happened there? So, but he survived. Got his family together. And, never went back to South Carolina because he was still a hunted man. He changed his name, kept the last name but his first name was changed a couple of times. And he moved from different places because he was worried about being caught as a fugitive and have to go back to South Carolina. He never went back and when my mother— there was something happening with a family member in the south—my mother would take my middle brother and my sister, and we would go back down during the summer months when I was out of school and we would help pick the cotton and work on the farm, which was something I enjoyed. I was going home, going to, back to life I knew. Those delicious strawberries and blueberries and, you know, all the things, that was going home. But we couldn't eat in certain places, so my mother used to fix lunch for us because we couldn't drink out of the regular water fountains. There were signs up, says 'White Only' and 'Colored Only.' If you drank out of the white fountain, you'd be arrested. So my mother would tell us, "Now you children got to be careful and you have to say, 'yes sir' to white folks, 'yes ma'am.' And if they walk down the street, you have to step aside." You couldn't use the facilities along the railroad. We traveled by rail, and you had to always be careful how you, how you treated the white folks and she was, didn't want us to get in trouble. My father was already a wanted man. So that was going back down to the south, which to us was fun. But then coming back home, had to go to school, that wasn't so pleasant sometimes, so...

Howe: So...The nature of living on the land, working the farm, once you left, was that property still under your care, under your family's care?

Capers: No. We were sharecroppers, which meant you shared the profits of the land with the owner. We didn't own the land, we just worked the land for the owner. And at the end of the year, you got whatever profits there were from selling the cotton and cropping the tobacco and all of that, which usually wasn't very much when you consider you had to go out and buy new seed for the next year and all the things you needed to do, and you know, usually, as I remember it, the family would get a hog in lieu of payment sometimes. We had no money, but there was a company store, you could go and get things on credit. But it wasn't, wasn't too much fun because the prices always went up at the end of the year and it wasn't a very fair system, but it was accepted. If you didn't have any money, which was usually the case, you could go in and get whatever you

needed for a period of time. But then when you ran your bill up and when you come in to get paid, whatever you were due to be paid went against that bill. That's why they used to call it the old company store. So you really had no money, but you could get things like a hog or a cow or something like that to sustain yourself. But it was always the landowner who made the money. But we didn't know the difference. So it was a pleasant life for us because that's, you know, we were maybe a couple generations out of slavery, which they worked for nothing. They didn't get the forty acres and a mule after the Emancipation Proclamation, which was in 1861. The war was over in, what 1865, somewhere along there, and as far as I know, no member of my family ever got the forty acres and a mule. That's all a piece of history, you know. But we saw the residuals, or the results of that and we just made the best we could with the life that we lived. Didn't know anything else and I'm the last living member and I'm, I've done pretty well. I've had some hard times, but I've survived because so many people made a difference in my life, both good and bad.

Howe: We'll get to that. So you're in Baltimore and you went to high school in Baltimore.

Capers: I went to middle school and then eventually into high school. And I joined the Marines in high school and one day after I graduated, I left for Parris Island.

Howe: Before we get to Parris Island, really quick, anything you recall about high school, things you were interested in, academics, sports?

Capers: I was a bright student, did really well, because I had this insatiable desire to learn because there were so many things that I wanted to, to experience. And I enjoyed high school. Met my wife in high school. We, what we would call dating, such as it was. And went to the prom together. Loved her the first time I saw her. And was kind of terrified. Fifteen, sixteen years old, and you know, growing up, but we didn't live in the same area, so after school, that was our time, you know. I'd wait for her to get out of her class and we'd stand there and talk and, and those type of things. You know, I joined the Marines, she went on to college at Morgan State in Baltimore. Or Coppin, Coppin State Teacher's College, she went to both of those I think. I joined the Marines and did three years early on and after I did my first three years, she was still unmarried and of course I was unmarried, so I approached her and says, "Hey," you know, "what was li-," so we wrote, stayed in con-, in contact. And I said, "I'm going to California. Would you like to go along?" Hadn't bothered to ask her to marry me yet, but she said yeah and we took off. Married for fifty years. But all that started in high school. There was a lot of other things that occurred, people that I met. I met my best friend, he's gone now, Oliver Pittman Campbell. And we were both on the wrestling team. You know, I played baseball, and wasn't much good at basketball or football. We didn't have the equipment back in those days and in high school, you went to class every other day. Didn't have room so you went to shop, carpentry, cabinet-making, a skill that you could use when you got out of high school. And you went to shop one day and then you went

to regular classes. They didn't teach mathematics in my school. In junior high, I had some degree of mathematics, arithmetic, but in high school they didn't teach that so I learned mathematics on my own. I used to go to the library, Enoch Pref Library- Enoch Pratt Free Library, which was established for slaves after the Civil War. Great library, they had teachers there. So after high school, I would go to the library and was taught by the teachers there in the library. Had all of these books and magazines, like Popular Mechanic and all those types of things. I just loved it. Books on social studies, I could learn about, you know, Greek history, Roman history, all those things that I didn't have in my school. The school, they were good teachers but we didn't have the money to buy those type of things and nobody really cared back in those days. Well I think they cared but not on the level we needed to teach us what we're going to need to function in society. And it was segregated. You know, had no swimming pool. And they had a pool in a park in the city there, but African Americans were not allowed to use the pool. But just, and there was an old place called Black Diamond which was a swimming hole. They had a plant there and it was a water hole next to this plant and we would go and swim in this place, but we couldn't go in the pond, in the pools there in the city, which was supposed to be for all citizens. We paid taxes but you couldn't go there. One time, they had a day set aside for black citizens to go there and we all went to the pond, to the pool and some young guy whistled at a very pretty white girl and that stopped it. Wouldn't going to have that. You know, so we never had the chance to go back. So I learned to swim in an old swimming hole and I would go there and imitate the movies that I saw which were popular at the time. Tarzan, and I'd imitate his strokes and I watched him wrestle alligators in the water and all this other stuff. That was, you know, my learning how to do those things. Swinging through the trees, you know I would—off the back of an old abandon house— I would jump off the roofs and things like that, trying to envision myself as Tarzan or someone like that or a stuntman. I was athletic and that's probably what led me into the Marines. But as far as education was concerned, there were good teachers, there were good times, it was social. We could play baseball at lunchtime. We had no real cafeteria for food, so you had to carry your own lunch. You had to wear a tie. You had to wear your clothes washed and pressed. You wore a jacket and your shoes had to be sined- shined. You know, there was a certain standard for the young ladies, which was what we called appropriate dressing. But we, we loved it because it gave us something of a standard to take out into the world with us. And the teachers were sometimes a little hard to deal with, because they knew how tough it was going to be when we got out of high school, so they tried to prepare us for working. They didn't think we were going to be president of a university or, in my case, president of a large corporation at some point. So I saw those things early on. When I got to that point, I was prepared for it. Lived a very disciplined and austere life early on, didn't know the difference. When I was going to, the early years, they would give me these little books. I couldn't get enough of reading. I just- it's what I did. I'd go down to the library and, and I would- they would let me bring the books home. They gave me a library card and I had so many books there. And I read them all.

I was so inspired by stories that I read in Popular Mechanics and the Readers Digest and all those things, I was- it was expanding a whole world to me. I began to compare that to the life I remembered in the South. But, my heart was still in the South, you know because that was my most joyous times. And I had the family around me, aunts and uncles and, you know, those types of things. But high school was an interesting time and I enjoyed it. I met my bride there. And that was a special time in my life and those are the times I remember today as a widower. Some of the things I remember.

Howe: What was the name of the high school, do you recall?

Capers: It was Carver, Carver Vocational Technical High School, still exists today. Carver Vocational Technical High School. Named after George Washington Carver, we know who he is, yeah.

Howe: It's interesting, you mentioned stories, story-telling and emulating certain figures. Who were your heroes growing up?

Capers: Tarzan. (Laughs) Really. No. We learned historical figures. We knew about George Washington Carver and Douglas, I can't remember his first name, Frederick Douglas. Those, were taught to us out of the books that we had. The history we have today was not told at that time. It was still evolving. And the majority didn't put down things in our books about the great things that African-Americans did, you know. I understand that someone probably invented the cotton gin, all those great things that African-Americans did, never got credit for it. So the things that the books we got reflected the majority. So we didn't have a knowledge of the Black heroes as we know today. We didn't know about the Tuskegee Airmen. Didn't know about the Montford Point Marines. The Marine Corps did not allow African-Americans to join the Marine Corps until 1942, Federal Law. And then '42 at the beginning of the war, President Roosevelt started allowing African-Americans to come in and during that period of time, during the war, from '42 to '45, there was twenty thousand African-Americans went to the Marine Corps and served overseas, different places. But two years ago, Congress awarded them the Congressional Medal of Honor, in retrospect. That's two years ago, they got recognized. Twenty thousand went through Montford Point, they have a base down there now at Camp Lejeune called Montford Point. In fact, they've invited me to their ball this Saturday. I'm going to their ball in Wilmington, North Carolina. So, we're learning these things now as the education opens up and we're exposed, we have the computers and all those things and kids can learn about their own history. We didn't have that back in those days, so what we had a lot was oral history. Our teachers would tell us their life stories. And there were some books, like at the Enoch Pratt Free Library, which was developed for slaves, they brought in a lot of books. And so you, you could go and study on your own. If the information was there, you had to go and get it. No one's going to go bring it to you, weren't going to bring it to your house. And my folks

were not educated, not educated people. So if you had the desire to learn to succeed, you did what Jim Capers did. You went out there and you got it.

Howe: I can already start to see the seeds of a Marine growing. Where do you think that began?

Capers: Probably high school, yeah probably high school. When, you know, my buddy Pittman, bless his heart, he lost his father early on and so he used to come to my house. We became good friends. I'd go to his house and we became brothers, we were not biological brothers, but we were so similar in a lot of ways. So when we got to the career day in high school and they brought the military in, Army, Navy, Air Force, and the Marine Corps and they all, all of the recruiters came in and had a big day and we all gathered in the auditorium and all these recruiters came there, stood there and we watched them all, watched their movements, all those things. We were thinking that, I'm going to have to serve, because back in those days when you turned eighteen, you had to go down and register. That's the way it was, you had to go and register for the draft. They had a draft back in those days and if you didn't register for the draft, they'd arrest you. Of course the draft was, you know, went away some years ago. In fact they had a draft up until the Vietnam War. But we were watching the military recruiters and we saw the young Marine there with the blue uniform and the medals and all that you know. We said, "Hey, that doesn't look too bad," you know. And he seemed a bit more knowledgeable, a bit more sure of himself. The other guys were very good too, but the Army and Navy. And I said, "Okay, let's, let's join the Foreign Legion first," (Laughter) and we were just, we were kids. "Let's join the Foreign Legion." We thought about it, "No, let's not join the Foreign Legion. Let's join the Marine Corps." So we went down and joined before we graduated out of high school and the next day we left for Parris Island. But that's how I, I joined because I saw the recruiter, and he was very impressive. So we talked about it, my buddy and I. Went home and told my, my parents that I'd joined the Marines. And the Marines were called Leathernecks and my mother always called them Roughnecks, so she didn't want her son to be a part of anything that, the Roughnecks or whatever it was. But she was okay, you know. She lost children obviously and I'm the baby and I'm going off now, so I could imagine what she was thinking. My father was proud of me, you know. He had always hoped that one of his children would, they used to say back in those- amount to something. You have to amount to something. You work hard and this country will give you an opportunity. It's not going to give you anything, but it'll give you an opportunity and you, you make the most of this opportunity. And when he took me down to the bus station, the train station, before I got on the train, he said, "If ten men start up a flight of stairs and only one man makes it to the top, you believe that you'll be that man and you'll get to the top. You have to believe that." He gave me a big hug and I got on the train and went away. The last thing he said to me, "You believe that. If ten men start out up a flight of stairs and one man makes it to the top, you Capers, you believe that, you'll make it to

the top." Here's a man with a third grade education. So, I went away and there were many days I had to hold on to what Dad said. It was a little difficult. About the first week in Parris Island, I began to have my doubts. I'm not sure if I can do this.

Howe: When did you arrive there?

Capers: 14 June, 1956. Scared to death. Maybe we should have joined the Foreign Legion, that might have been a little easier.

Howe: And Pittman was there with you?

Capers: Yeah, went all the way. He broke his leg in boot camp, had to be set back a couple of weeks so I didn't see him for a while. He graduated. I graduated on time, went home and he finally came home a few weeks later. I don't think his leg was entirely broken, but it set him back for a while. And then I had to go back to Parris Island after my ten days leave was over. Then they sent me up to Camp Lejeune for infantry training. And so we were disconnected for a while. I didn't see him for about a year. I had to go overseas and then he went overseas, but remained- we wrote, always good friends. I delivered the eulogy at his funeral. Good man, good man. Life-long friend. You know, those were the, those were the good days. We-the high school days were good. He married, I married and, and it was like having a real brother. And we took care of each other.

Howe: I'm going to write this down and I'm going to ask it in a minute. (Pause) But before I do, I'm curious about, what do you recall about basic training?

Capers: Didn't want to be there. I didn't want to- No, actually, it was an interesting time. I loved it, in a way, because I began to figure out who I was and what I was capable of doing. I found that a lot of my father in me, and it was a time that you become a man. The boot camp, what we call boot camp or recruit training, it breaks you down. It makes you depend on other Marines, become a team. We eat, we sleep, we cry as a team and you'd give your life for that team member. You work hard- there is no longer any individualism, that's all gone now. If one, if one member of that team fails, then the team fails. You're linked together forever. Forever. And once you go through a Marine boot camp, it never goes away. And you honor those drill instructors. They're kind of different people. You know, they're violent and during my time, they would kind of bang you around a little bit. You can't do that today. Before I got there, there were seven Marines, no six Marines, drowned in a place called Ribbons Creek. And they were out for some remedial night training and they drowned and there was a big investigation. And they wanted to abolish the Marine Corps, we were the most horrible place in the world, and, but fortunately people realized they still might need us one day. You know, they'd forgotten it was Marines who took Guadalcanal, who took Iwo Jima and Tarawa and Saipan and Okinawa and frozen Chosin Reservoir, and now because, I mean we all were sad about those young boys who died in Ribbons Creek. The drill instructor had a couple of drinks and didn't do the right thing, one individual. But you can't blame the

whole Marine Corps, who'd been around for two hundred and something years, well not in those days. But, we got over it. They revisited our training methods and realized that we need to lighten up just a little bit, but we didn't want soft Marines. We want guys that could, you know, who could make the sacrifice for our country. And so there were some things that was done to make it a little bit more human. I mean it was really a very difficult place to survive and when you are first there, like I said, they break you down; sleep deprivation, you know, you eat when they tell you to eat, you get up, you go to bed. And they make you do despicable things to depend on your friend, your teammate. No matter where they are, where they come from, who they pray to, they become your friend, your brother. And he will lay down his life for you as you would for him. And I saw that many times in battle. It all starts right there at Parris Island. And there's many books written on the history of Parris Island. You know, I wrote a few pieces about my experiences. I went through when it was integrated. Montford Point was segregated up until 1949, when they closed it down and all the African-American Marines could now go through Parris Island. Very difficult, there were very few African-Americans in my class. It was very hard to get into the Marine Corps and they put you through a program. When you graduate from a Marine boot camp, you know, you've, you passed the test. There were some good things you learned and, and the NCO's, they're good actors, you know. They make you think you're going to die in boot camp, but really they're for you. They put you to bed at night and they do take care of you. You don't really know that because you're scared to death half the time. And they put that fear in you. You know, we've seen all the movies about, you know, how graphic boot camp can be, but I thought it was a great time for me because I'm still learning. I don't know the difference. I hadn't had that experience that I had in the very violent war during the Vietnam era. I hadn't experienced that yet. So what I'm going through in boot camp, my father told me, "You can do this. You can do this." But when you get there at night, and you're lying there by yourself, you're ripped away from your family, your support base and you're lying there scared to move and you hear "Taps" play. You know, when you hear all these things about Parris Island, you know surrounded by water, which we were told had alligators in it so if you try to get away you're going to get eaten up by the alligators so you may as well stay here and deal with us. But it was a good time for learning. They taught you how to make your bed, how to shine your shoes, how to shine your brass. They taught you things that you needed to know just as a man. We were teenagers, 17, 18 years old. So they, they turned us into men, hardened men and made us believe we could fight anything in the world and come out victorious. Defeat was something that was despicable to us. We ran the obstacle courses, the bayonet courses. We punched each other. We did all those various things and we, we had to meet that challenge. And they set things in front of us that made us overcome our own fear. When you walked out on the obstacle course to do all the things they put us, they put us through, you take a real measure of yourself. But the drill instructors take a real interest in each one of the troops. You may not know it but he knows more about you than you know about him obviously. And you know, it was a

father-son relationship. They really loved their troops. They're not going to tell you that, of course, not going to show you any kind of affection. But I do remember when I showed a little bit of leadership, one of my DI's came over to me and said, "You know, you're, you're a good man, Private. You're going to do well in this Marine Corps." You know. He gave me a measure of myself with just those words of kindness, "You're doing good." That's what I wanted to hear. And I took off. I was good. I won the outstanding rifle marksmanship and they give you an award if you're the best shooter. And, for some reason, I had this remarkable ability with weapons and I was the outstanding rifleman and they gave me a gift and all those things and a nice little certificate. I don't know how it happened but I was the best marksman there and I remained a good marksman throughout my entire life. I don't shoot any more, though. No, just too much. When people on the other end died and I don't want to see those things again.

Howe: Two things before we move on. What about the experience came to you as a culture shock in basic training?

Capers: Well, they call you black boy or white boy. You know, come here, black one, or come here white one. A lot of the DI's back in those days were from the South and I don't know if there was much racial connotation to it, that's the way they identified you. Everybody was a 'boy.' "Get over here boy. Give me 15 push-ups," or whatever it was, you know. Everything was by the numbers. And that was -they rattle you, early on, put you in a state of fear, from-from day one. They yell at you all the time, even if you don't do anything wrong, they yell at you. And that was sort of a state of shock for all of us. They take you down to get your haircut, your shots and all your equipment, and, and you're constantly standing at attention, and constantly someone's in your face. If you're buttoned or unbuttoned, or your rifle's not in the right position, somebody is going to say something to you. They have a lot of DI's, they just swarm around you. And they just, it just - you're just in a state of shock. And it is a culture shock because you're dealing with young men from different parts of the country, different religion, different races, you're all thrown together now. You're going to sink or swim. And you had to get used to this guy from New York or California or whatever it is because the Marine Corps is no longer segregated. Everybody is thrown together. We're just all teenagers and the DI is not going to make an exception. If your father is a billionaire, doesn't make any difference at Parris Island. You're going to go through the same thing that everybody else goes through. And a lot of times, we ate as a family. You know, you sat at the table there and members of your squad, we would all sat there together and you'd pass the rolls or the mashed potatoes around and you'd make sure everybody got some, got a proportion. So it was like, you know, being part of a family. You may have a Mexican kid over here, a white kid over here, a Jewish kid over here, all at the same table and you all taking care of each other. And if somebody is tired, someone is going to carry his rifle for him. Or if somebody is falling out, someone is going to go and grab him and drag him along. And maybe you, it's somebody that you wouldn't have liked in society,

but now he's your friend and if you're a little tired, someone is going to carry you. We carried each other. We helped the slower ones. And that's the way we developed this, you know, "Once a Marine, Always a Marine," thing and we're a team. We're a family and that remains that way until you take your last breath.

Howe: This may be a similar question: What was the most challenging experience that you faced during that time?

Capers: Well, leaving my buddy Pitt behind. That was difficult, because we left together and I'm going home without him now. What would I say to his family? I felt guilty. I felt like I could have done something. Had I known, I could have been of some assistance to him. That was a challenge. At the end of our training, which was thirteen weeks. We got there in June and I left in September. There were challenging things, not anything specific. Well, you know, I had an altercation with a, with a new recruit. He was from the South and he probably had some issues with me, it's been a long time ago, and he walked up and punched me. And I reeled up against a rack, a bed. I didn't like it, so I picked him up and dumped him on his head. I'd been a wrestler in high school, so I knew that. I picked him up, dropped him on his head. So somebody says, "Hey, you guys go in head and settle this." That's what you do when you have an altercation. You go in the head, bathroom, and you duke it out, and then you get it out of your system. Then that's okay. You go back to being buddies again. So we went in the head, we're going to settle this. Durman came over to me and he said, you know. He didn't really want to fight me and I didn't want to fight him. And the DI's all know about this. That's your rite of passage, you know, duke it out, man on, you know, that's what we did. And he says, "This don't make any kind of sense." He shook my hand, I shook his hand and we walked out. We never did fight. I didn't want to fight anyway. I didn't want to get in trouble. But, he gave me a big old black eye, (Laughter) caught me off guard, he just smacked me. But it's okay, you know, you learn those things. It was a disappointment to me because I didn't know why he was pissed at me to begin with. But you get over those kind of things and we became friends in boot camp, became friends in boot camp. But there was, that kind of stuff was going on, the tough guy, and eventually, about half way through, the tough guys are helping the not so tough guys. You know, you're always going to find a bully and, and we had some of the hazing things that would go on. If a kid was holding you back. If he had a guy in the team or the platoon wasn't performing up to standards, then some of the other guys would teach him a lesson because every time he failed, we failed. The DI would punish us because you got a guy that didn't have his boots shined. So the guys would say, "Listen, you're costing us so you'd better get," you know, and so sometime after that, the lights went out, they'd come over and punch him out, teach him a lesson. Not the preferred way to do things, but that went on. But it was the way of keeping the drill instructor off of you because if he looked and inspected the platoon and one of the team members was not squared away, he blamed the whole platoon. You're going to run an extra mile for that or you're going to do some pushups

because that one man failed. So it's our ability, our responsibility now, to get him up to par, to make sure his rifle is clean, his bayonet is clean. Make sure he's got a haircut, all those kind of things. We all went to church together one Sunday, you know. It was a family, a wonderful family. And through the years, the wars came and I lost most of them, even my best friend. But we didn't know that at the time. At the end of the training, you know, we all signed each other's books. We were lifelong friends now, black and white, brown and yellow, you know. And I'm- they went home now, and some of the white kids went home to the black neighborhoods to live with the black kids. And some of the black kids went home to the white neighborhoods and lived with the white kids because they didn't know any difference anymore. "This is my buddy," I'm sure he didn't think about it. "Hey Mom, this is my buddy, Joe Blow here, from Parris Island." And there were a lot of times when these guys went to boot camp, had no families. The military was their only option. Do that or go to jail. And sometimes, when you found out this guy didn't have a family, you took him home with you. I did it many times, "Come home with me." "Hey Mom, I've got this guy here from Alaska, wherever that's at," and so he was part of that, this thing that you feel, this brotherhood. It works, it really works. And of course when I became a commander, years later, as an older guy, and now I'm in command and I'm teaching my young Marines that the values that I had when I was a young man, and it works today.

Howe: I think we need more of it. So after basic training, after recruit training, you said you went home.

Capers: Went home, ten days leave, and saw my parents and I showed off my uniform, you know, had my new uniform on and I felt so confident. I would sit on my steps and just show off, "Look what I've done. I've been through thirteen weeks of hell. Don't mess with me. I'm a Marine." I got my Marksmanship battles on- badges on and I just would sit out there, you know, just so proud of myself. And the neighbors would come by to congratulate me, you know, and the girls would come by and sit next to me and, and my mother would take me shopping with her, "Oh look, this is my son here," you know. My father was so proud of me, and I was proud to be back home again. And I didn't really want to go back to boot camp, to tell you the truth, I think I'd like to stay here. Everybody brought me something, the food was good. They'd want to hear the stories about boot camp, and you know we didn't have many African-Americans, you know back, during that time going to boot camp, so you know, being a Marine with that beautiful uniform on, you were something special. But then that ten days went by. Now you've got to pack your bags, say goodbye to everybody and go back to Parris Island. But that was just a training stop-off point. We went to Parris Island to get ready to go for infantry training, which was in North Carolina.

Howe: How long was infantry training?

Capers:

Well, amazingly it wasn't very long, because I got there and the Egyptians closed down the Suez Canal and Eisenhower was President, so he sent the Marines in. The British came in and they helped us a little bit. We still had the Soviet Union back in those days. They were trying to get the Egyptians to be on their side, they probably did for a little while. But I was sent, from Infantry training, we started the program. Then one night, the instructors came in and turned the floodlights on and everybody muster outside. The trucks were lining up on the outside. "Okay, men, training is over," we'd been there about a week or so. "You're going to war." And we were teenagers. And they took us to Camp Lejeune and put us into regular infantry battalions as replacements, because some of the guys who were going overseas didn't have enough time to deploy, so they put us recruits in to fill the gaps. So they sent us to Morehead City. The next night we were going across the Atlantic to, to Suez Canal. Now we didn't have to land, but we were there and it was kind of scary. We had gotten new weapons and new equipment and first time, we're going to war now. Had all this training in boot camp. We figured we'd needed, we're going to need this, but we had new NCO's, they were no longer drill instructors at Parris Island. But they were platoon sergeants and squad leaders that had been around for a while. So us recruits now, you know, we're thinking the worst. So we took off and that night the ship sailed from Morehead City. The next morning I was in the Atlantic Ocean. This great big old, which I'd never seen before, Atlantic Ocean, sailing across, took us about two weeks to get across the Atlantic Ocean. And eventually the Egyptians opened up the Suez Canal again and we turned around and came back to, we came back to Portsmouth, Virginia. And they gave us a little bit of liberty in Portsmouth, Virginia, which was segregated, and my squad, we always went out together, even on liberty. So we went into this little bar there in Portsmouth and I was sitting there and guy come over and says, "I'm sorry but you can't be in here." I was the only black guy in my, in my squad. Should have thought about it, didn't occur to me at that time. Thought we were done with that. Then, he said, "There's some black bars down the street over there, or in the neighborhood, that you can go into but you can't be in here." And my squad leader came over and says, you know, "The private here is with us and when we go, we go as a team. If you can't serve him," he just said, "We don't serve Negroes," that's what he said. "We don't serve Negroes in here." And the squad leader said, "If you can't serve him, you can't serve us." We probably just should have left it alone and left. But he didn't leave it alone. He started a ruckus and got to be a problem, so they hustled me out the back door. I didn't know, when you're a 17-18 year old kid, you don't know. And we decided that we'd go back to the ship. They took me back to the ship and, you know, being with your team, I should have thought about it. It just never occurred to me, at that time. But it was okay, nobody got hurt and the shore patrol came and, you know, ran us all out and the whole bit. But number one, I remember the Sergeant saying, "Get over here, kid. Stand behind me." I said, "Well, I can hold my own, you know, if we're going to get into a tussle, I want to do my part." He said, "No, you stand behind me. We'll handle this." And he's kind of a nasty guy, you know, he was nobody you really wanted to fool with. He'd been around a while, was a

buck Sergeant. He said, "You stand behind me." And I went to, you know, at least do something. He said, "Doggonnit. I told you to stand behind me." You know, "Get out of here!" But it was, it was an experience and I began to learn a little bit more about what I should do and what I should not do. But I learned- I depend on my leaders, because I knew he was going to take care of me. It didn't make any difference, I didn't think he knew, he even cared what I was. I could have been from Mars, that's the way he was, because we were conditioned, I mean, there were some time we missed the point on some of those things, but for the most part, we were so close together that some of these things became meaningless. But you learned something from those type of things. It was an experience, you- it's growing up.

Howe: Small unit cohesiveness.

Capers: Yeah.

Howe: You returned to Portsmouth. Where did you guys go next?

Capers: Went back to Camp Lejeune and they gave us leave. Went home to see my family and I went back to Camp Lejeune and this would have been my second year and they were sending another battalion out to the Middle East again, and I figured, "Well, you know, why not?" So they were looking for volunteers to go out with this other, another battalion on what we called a Med cruise, part of the 6th Fleet. So they wanted volunteers, and I says, "Okay." I volunteered and went out for my second cruise. And there was a little bit of a situation with the Syrians over there and the Russians. We didn't do anything that time, it was a show of force. And we dodged a bullet, came back home and I went home to see my family. And I was continuing to write to my, my girlfriend, I guess my wife was called my girlfriend then and I'd go see her and, you know, begin to think, you know, I kind of like her, you know. And I had no car at that time and so I used to take a cab and go over and see her, you know. We'd go to the movies, things like- talk about high school days and tell her what I was doing. I was this great hero now, you know. And then in 1958, they wanted more volunteers, so I went back my third year, 1958. By this time I was a Corporal and I'd passed all the tests, I'd kept my nose clean and I was making rank. Landed in Lebanon. In July of 1958, we made an amphibious landing in Lebanon because they'd had to, they had to evacuate all the Americans from the Embassy. So the Marines landed and took all the civilians to the airport to evacuate them because there was a civil war going on in Lebanon at that time. So we spent 30 days there cleaning up the bandits and chased them up into the mountains. That was my first little taste of combat. It wasn't that much, but you know we had a chance for a little trigger time. Stayed there about 30 days and we got the job done and we came back to Camp Lejeune. And I'd made Meritorious Sergeant on the operation. You know, they give you a promotion if you just, if you distribute some, you know, if you wanted to exhibit leadership and those type of things, which I did. You know there was a lot to that, you know that Meritorious promotion. But we came back

home and, and my three years was going to be up. I'd come in in '56 and this was now last of '58 and '59 I could have got out or, or reenlist in Marine Corps. So I wasn't decided what I wanted to do. But when I'd come back from those cruises, I would see married men. When their families would come and visit them, they'd be on the pier and the band would be playing. They'd welcomed home, you know, from our adventures overseas. And they would go home to their families and I went back to the barracks. You know, then I got to thinking about my wife and, well my girlfriend. So I went home and I told her that, you know, my time was about up now and I could reenlist, stay in the Marine Corps, which I'm doing pretty good, Sergeant now, or I could get out. I didn't have much of a future at that time, you know. What, what would I do when I got out? I didn't have a real job that I could go and make a living that I knew of. I had a high school education, which was pretty big back in those days, you know. So she asked me, "What will you do, where will you go?" And I said, "Well I'd never been to California." Said, "I could go to California." And I said, "Would you like to go with me?" And she said, "Yes." And then I had to ask her to marry me, you know so, she said, "Yes." We got married, went off to California and had a wonderful life. Fifty years. Kind of awkward, you know, that I had to go home and tell my mother, "Mom guess what? I'm getting married." And, but everybody was happy for me, you know. I could have gotten out, you know it was difficult time back in those days. A lot of the guys drank a little wine on the corners and did a lot of the things that, I didn't see that as part of my future. I didn't want to be just somebody there that didn't make a difference, you know. I wanted to do something that my family would be proud of me, and when I was in the Marines, I always sent a small check home to my family. I had the finance people take a portion out of my check because I could buy a bar of soap for three, three cents or five cents. You could buy a pack of cigarettes for twenty cents. Living was cheap back in those days. I always gave a dollar to Red Cross. I gave a dollar to, was it the other group, but charitable groups, Navy Relief. And I had enough money and I sent home, you know, to my folks, because sometime my folk-my, my father would get laid off and, and you know, so I wanted to help out. And I did that until I got married. Then I got a little place in California, paid 44 bucks a month for it, happiest days of my life. We had a wonderful child and, and you know, so much in love, until the time came for me to go fight the war. Then I sent my wife home to Baltimore to live with her parents and I took off and was moving ever since.

Howe: So you did reenlist?

Capers: Yeah. I reenlisted. '59 and got married and we both went to California.

Howe: Where at?

Capers: Camp Pendleton. That's when I first joined the Commandos, First Force Reconnaissance Company. And you were all parachutists. Different- you see the young Seals doing today, we did that back in the '60s and special operation guys, we were doing it back in

those, all the jumping, the swimming and all of that. Blowing things up. What, what you would call Commandos today. I did three years there. Half that time was deployed overseas. And I learned all the specifics of special operations, special warfare. I got to go to jump school, the Army jump school in Fort Benning, Georgia and I did a lot of the things that give you the basics. Then eventually I became the commanding officer of a unit like that.

Howe: You make it sound so easy.

Capers: No, it wasn't easy now. Especially a guy looked like me. I was the only African-American there and there were some challenges. There were some who didn't feel like I needed to be there, but I'd passed all the tests. The tests is not easy now. You, you've got to bring it, you can't talk your way through this. You know, you've got to be able to get it done and there's somebody watching you. If you're not good, don't even- don't even bother to apply, and especially as an African-American, don't bother to apply, we don't want you anyway, probably. That was the way it was back in those days but if you are good and you prove yourself, they are going to welcome you in. You don't give them any reason to say you can't handle it. I had to work a little harder than the other guys. A little harder, but I knew I could do it. All I wanted was an opportunity. Don't give me anything special, give me an opportunity. That's all I want. That's all I want. And I, when I got the opportunity, I knew I couldn't fail. Just when I became a Major in the Marine Corps, I knew I couldn't fail. We didn't have any generals back in, we didn't have a black Colonel back in those day. When I became a Major in the Marine Corps, you know, we didn't have that. So it all came eventually, but what if I had failed? I was the first African-American to be a Marine Commando officer, black officer. And this Commando Hall of Honor Medal, which they gave to me, obviously as an African-American, was the first one to get this. I'm proud of that. There's one other living Marine who has one. His name is Digger O'Dell, lives in Pendleton. And I have one. What are the chances of a black kid from South Carolina, who picked cotton and cropped tobacco end up with a Commando Medal of Honor? A lot of water between those statements, though.

Howe: First of all, how did you, how did you get recruited into...

Capers: You volunteered. You go over and take the test. You say I want to be a Recon Marine and- because after I got married, I, you know, I lived on the base, had a child, enjoying- because I'd been deployed a lot on the, on the east coast with the 6th fleet. And after a while, you know, you do the fatherly thing and all that, husbandly things, but I was still a Marine and still young and still want to do those things, but I've got a family now. And my child was born blind and special needs, so I had additional responsibility. I loved them so much and, you know, we were a young couple and so much in love. We have our own little paradise place there. But after a while I got to thinking, you know I missed those days with my buddies and missed those adventurous days and so I'd heard about this triple threat group, First Force Reconnaissance Company and they were

based at Camp Lejeune. I was in a support group. I was guarding prisoners at that time, you know, was at a Brig, basically, which was designed to keep the kids who didn't want to comply to regulations, how, you know, teach them a lesson. So I was one of the, the guards there and one of the instructors there. And I got tired of that and I heard about this triple threat group so I figured, you know, it would be nice to be back out in the fleet again, I'd gotten a little itchy. I wanted to get out and fire some rounds and jump out of some airplanes. But the only group around that could do that was First Force. So I asked my, my First Sergeant, "Can I go volunteer?" He said, "Well you know it's kind of a tough organization, you know, you might want to- you've got a young wife at home and a child." And I said, "I know but I'll talk to her about it." She didn't seem to have a problem- she wanted me to be successful, my wife did. She's always been very supportive, you know, even to our later years. But with the First Sergeant's blessing, I went over to the group, say, "I'm Corporal Jim Capers, I want to volunteer." Of course they looked at me with some degree of- there was no African-Americans there. But they gave me a chance and I wished I hadn't volunteered. It was very brutal, very difficult but I knew I could do it. When the first, first time I took the test, it was a totally exhausting test. You do as much as humanly possible and then that's not enough. So they told me that, "Well, you did okay, but we want you to come back on Monday," this was on a Friday. And I thought, 'oh man, I don't know if I can do this or not.' So I went back on Monday and I took the test again. They told me I'd passed but they weren't sure, whoever it was, they weren't sure whether I should be there or not. So this Monday, they took me in to see their Major, who was a company commander, and he looked me over and asked me a lot of questions, you know. 'If I had put this hand grenade on the floor would you jump on it,' and stupid stuff like that, you know, to test, you know, your reaction time and I told him no, I wouldn't. (Laughs) He had it on his desk there. I told him, "No sir, I wouldn't jump on a hand grenade." And I mean, I knew what a hand grenade would do, I had thrown enough of those things. But he said, "Yes that was a pretty dumb question I just asked you." But, you know, he passed me and then I...he said okay, let me join, and let me go to the training program. See, I'd passed the entrance exam just to get there, to get the right to go to training. Then I had to go boot camp- I mean I had to go to jump school. I had to go to demo school. I had to go to the jungle for-. And all those things you had to do, went to the POW survival program. All these things you had to do as a part of about a two year program, you know, to learn your skills. And you know, you get shoot every weapon known to man and martial arts and all those things and after you feel you, you're qualified, they'll put you in a team. I was deployed with this team. I spent 15 months with it. And then after that was over, I was a Sergeant by that time. Then I came home from Okinawa, Japan and reunited with my family and came back to Camp Lejeune. By this time I was an instructor; I'm, I'm teaching troops now, I'm a Sergeant. And there's, you know, a lot of that, I'm just reflecting on the book that I wrote, you know. I'm just remembering what I wrote in my memoir. And there's a lot to that, but just the high points. I came back to Camp Lejeune and had to deal with the problem that my son needed to go to school and

he was blind and special needs. He needed to learn to read Braille, and the only place to do that was in Baltimore, which was a good school and we didn't have many programs for special needs children in Carolina. So I put in for a humanitarian transfer to take me to Marine Barracks Fort Meade and I would be allowed to put my son in school. And it was granted and I went to Marine Barracks Fort Meade and lived on an Army base, put my son in school. He learned to read Braille and we had a great time there. Then the Vietnam War hit, I had a choice: do you stay here with your blind son and your young wife or do you say, 'my country needs me and I'm going to go and do my share.' Talked it over with my wife and she said yes. So I volunteered for Third Force, this would be my third tour, or my second tour in Recon. Third Force, we formed in November 1965. I got out of the hospital in March of 1968. That time, I was in battle, training or the hospital. But I survived it and came home.

Howe: Go back to that one more time. You were injured during training and you went to the hospital?

Capers: No, I was injured during the war in Vietnam. I said from November 1965 until March 12th, 1968, I was either in battle, in training or the hospital in Bethesda, Maryland.

Howe: Got it. So you joined Third Force in '65. Where were they based out of?

Capers: Camp Lejeune, North Carolina.

Howe: And when did they get deployed?

Capers: April of 1966. We went over the, we went over through the Suez- went across the [???:1:25.41.8] through the Suez Canal and then to Vietnam. Took us thirty days to get across, to get...We were on an aircraft carrier, USS Boxer, and got to Vietnam in, in May of 1966.

Howe: How did your wife feel about knowing that you were headed in that direction?

Capers: She felt good. Because we had a blind child there and I was a member of the Fort Meade drill team and every Thursday we would go out to Fort McHenry, the birthplace of the "Star Spangled Banner." Francis Scott Key wrote that wonderful tune, which I never remember the words of it most times. But every Thursday we would go out there and drill and do the Francis Scott Key thing. Had a drum and bugle corps, a marching team and people would come to see us. We'd play the "Star Spangled Banner," we'd sing all these patriotic songs. Meanwhile our young Marines and soldiers were going to Vietnam and fighting and dying. And because the Commandant said that I was a hardship case, he wouldn't deploy me because I had a blind child. But yet I was out there on Thursdays at Fort McHenry talking about patriotism, what it takes, what it means to be an American. This country's worth fighting for. But yet when it comes to Jim Capers, I'm not in war because I've got a hardship and I felt bad. I couldn't stand to

be out there singing these wonderful songs, you know. "The rocket's red glare," you know, and all those things. I'm standing out there, representing the Marine Corps but my brothers are fighting and dying in battle. And I'm here now. So I felt guilty. I'd go home and take my uniform off and I felt like this isn't right, because I chose to get married, that's my child. I shouldn't have to have someone do my duty. And my wife sensed that. So when the word come out they were looking for volunteers to go to Vietnam with this special group, I went home and told my wife, you know, "They're looking for volunteers again." She said, "Don't tell me." She already knew. And of course my officers—I was an enlisted man at the time, I was a Sergeant at that time—my officers said to me, "Well you know Sergeant, you don't have to go, you can't be deployed." And I said, "Well I understand you're looking for volunteers for Third Force," and they said, "Yeah we are but you're a special case," and I'm thinking I'm nobody special, I'm a Marine. So they said, "Yeah, but we, we can't do that." So I said, "Well, let me go talk to my wife." And I was home talking to my wife and these two officers came to the house and said, "Can we talk to your wife?" They said, "We know you want to go but you've got a wife and child here." My son was a resident student at the Maryland School for the Blind. He stayed during the week and we got him home on the weekends. And he learned to read Braille and play music, those kind of things. But the two officers wanted to talk to my wife to make sure they knew I'd volunteered and she was insulted. She said, "How dare you come to my home and tell me that my husband won't do his duty." She said a few more choice words. She said, "Gentlemen if you don't want anything else, if I can't get you a drink or something to eat, you can leave my home. My husband will do his duty and he'll come home." I was so proud of her. You know, "We're Americans. We're the same as you. We'll do our duty. So don't, don't tell me my husband won't do his duty. And gentlemen, good evening." I was never so proud of her, you know. "We're patriots and we'll do our duty for this country." And that's the last thing she said to me before she passed away: "Take care of the guys." She passed away that afternoon in the hospital, a wonderful woman. She's gone now six years. So, but all those things we talked about, she said, "I'll be here when you come back. I'll be here when you come back." But those are things I remember leading up to the decision to go, don't go, who will take care of my child now if I don't come back? Would he be cold, would he be hungry? Who will help him along, he has no sight. I had to deal with those things, but at the same time, my country needed me. I have never, ever, let my country down. I haven't then, I won't now. So, I went.

Howe: What did you know about that environment before you went there? About Vietnam?

Capers: Oh, I'd been through jungle training, and Panama, and Zambales jungle in the Philippines. So I'd been through a lot of training, but I hadn't been... training is one thing but when someone is shooting at you, it's a little different. So I had a little combat experience in Lebanon, that wasn't, that was in the mountains mostly, shooting at snipers, them shooting at you or the Russians threatening and all this and that. We

could hear the tanks rumbling and all that. Sometimes they would fire off artillery to make us think they were coming across the border, but no, I knew a lot about Laos. We thought we were going into Laos. That was the big topic at that time. And Vietnam was fighting with the, well they were at the National Liberation Front. Because you know, in 1954, the French had sent in the French Foreign Legion and you know at Dien Bien Phu they got wiped out, or captured. And so Eisenhower did not get involved in that. The French asked for help but Eisenhower said, "No, we are not going to commit American troops to this," because it was a colonial power. France was. So when we went in, we went in because of the SEATO treaty and we were part of the SEATO Treaty and we were committed to helping South Vietnamese because in 1954 they divided North and South Korea; you know, above the 17th parallel was North Korea and below the 17th parallel was South Korea. *(Vietnam or Korea here?) The North invaded the South and we had a treaty with the South so we were committed to go in and help the South Vietnamese fight against aggression and we had the British and the Australians and the Koreans with us. And, but for the most part, we carried the load. And we went in and joined with the South but they were a little different to deal, a little hard to deal with. They had some crooks and, you know, president, I forget his name now, can't think of his name, but he was president and he was, I think he was a Vietnamese pilot at one time. Cronyism, the families owned everything, it was not a good situation, but our primary problem was the North was sponsored by the Russians and the Chinese. And the Russians and Chinese were nuclear-powers, and the Russians threatened to come in and, of course the Chinese right on the border there. If they'd come across like they did in 1950 during the Korean War above the 38th parallel, when MacArthur didn't want them to come South, but they came South and we had to back out of Korea. We were there from '50 to '53. Now you know, the Vietnam thing, the Communists were the North, North Vietnamese. We were there to fight against the spread of Communism. We talked about the Domino Effect. If we lose South Korea *(Vietnam?), we'll lose Cambodia, Thailand and of that. And of course there were some natural resources, you know, copper and tin, and all that went with it also, so there were some other things that went along. And of course the Russians wanted to become a super power when they got the nuclear weapon back in late '40's. And the Chinese obviously just felt like it was a regional problem and Americans and the British shouldn't be a part of it. But Laos was a part of that problem also, and Cambodia. We operated in Laos and Cambodia and Vietnam.

Howe: So you left there, you left to go there in '65?

Capers: '65. I left Fort Meade, Maryland, to go to Camp Lejeune and then I went to Vietnam in April of 1966.

Howe: What was it like once you got there?

Capers:

When we first went across, went through the Suez Canal, the Indian Ocean, we finally got into a place called Nha Trang and we did a diving mission there. One of our ships had been blown up by a limpid magnetic mine and so we were asked to go down— you know we were combat swimmers, divers—so we were asked to go down and search the bottom of the ship, make sure that no one placed explosives on the ship. I led that diving mission in Nha Trang harbor. The ship was a thousand meters- thousand feet long. I took ten divers with me and we checked the whole ship, found that there were no mines. And while we were in the water, the Army, unfortunately, was there in Nha Trang, they had a special forces base there and they would dump their garbage off in the bay there. And the Navy was supposed to tell the Army, "Hey, I've got some Marine divers in the water so don't dump your garbage," because sharks would come out and eat the garbage. Well, they forgot to tell the Army and we were coming up from the dive and you could see all these tiger sharks out there feeding on the garbage and I cancelled the dive because I didn't want to chance... take the chance that one of my kids getting swept away and into the path of those tiger sharks. But we got the job done. We did it again in, in... we did it in Da Nang, did another diving mission in Da Nang. That's what we were. We were combat divers, what they used to call Underwater Demolitions. That was our first entry into the combat theatre. And it was kind of scary. We had our combat swimming stuff on and when you go down, you have to go down under the ship. The ship displaced—I forget how many tons of water, maybe twenty eight thousand tons of water—but we had to go down under the ship, tie each other in with buddy ropes because you can't see anything down there. You have to hold on to each other or with the buddy lines. Then you feel the bottom of the ship, swimming along, and see if there are any mines under there. Because they had divers, the enemy had divers too. And you feel different things and wonder 'okay, what have I got here?' But I had been through the training and I knew pretty much about mines and those types of things. One of my great moments, we got everybody back safe. And kind of a bad day in terms of almost losing a man to those tiger sharks out there, we got him back though. We didn't lose him. But you could see them, you know, they're about six or eight feet long, they're just vicious. Nothing stands in their way, they're just, you know, weren't as large as some of the largest sharks, but they were so aggressive. They were called tiger sharks, almost ten feet long.

Howe:

What happened? Why do you think he was attacked?

Capers:

He, his buddy line came away, came loose, he was drifting away. See, we were all in a team. Each of us had a buddy line and you tie it in with his buddy line. And if something- if there's a problem, you could pull on the line and let your buddy know you needed him, whatever it is. It's a rope that you have around you because there's no visibility down there, so you have, you're feeling with your hands. And the buddy line keeps everybody together. And one man came loose and was drifting toward the sharks,

so we had to get him and get him back in the boats before he got too far toward the sharks. No casualties, a good day.

Howe: Where else, where else did you go?

Capers: Oh my goodness. That would take too long. We went to Okinawa for training again, jungle warfare training. That's where the bloody battle of WWII took place in 1945. One of the most disastrous battles we had in terms of casualties. We went there and did all the training and no firing of our weapons and doing, blowing things up, just practicing. Then we went back into Vietnam, went to the Philippines first. Went through some more training and then we got aboard amphibious ships and made four amphibious landings up near the DMZ, the Demilitarized Zone. Then we left there and came south to Da Nang, we went north to Phu Bai and then we went to Khe Sanh, which was a pretty nasty little battle. So we were all over for a little while.

Howe: Were you permanently stationed at Khe Sanh or was it just a way point along the way?

Capers: No, we came, we came off the special landing force, which we made four amphibious landings up near the DMZ. We lost 36 men killed and 300-and 200 wounded during that month and a half we were with the special landing force. And this special landing force made amphibious landings up near the DMZ to fight against the North Vietnamese. We finished up that and out of that battalion we were supporting, we lost 36 men killed and 200 wounded. Then we moved south to Da Nang. Then we moved north to a place called Phu Bai and from Phu Bai, we ran special operations. I did the B57 mission, which we were sent out to locate a downed B57 bomber and we located it, got the information off it. This was an Air Force bomber and we were told we'd be out there for one day, they'd pick us up the next day. Unfortunately the weather got bad and the choppers couldn't fly, they couldn't pick us up. So we walked home, ten miles through the jungle. Took us five days, no food, no water. We had to swim the river. We walked through two mine fields, didn't lose a man.

Howe: Did you locate the B57?

Capers: We found it. The B57 was an offshoot of the aircraft that was shot down over Russia in 1961 with Gary Powers, who was a CIA pilot and he chose not to commit suicide and they captured his aircraft. The aircraft that we were looking for was an offshoot of that aircraft and had the capability of carrying a nuclear weapon. And we needed to find it. I didn't find anything on it. Folks over the years have asked me, "What did you really find on that aircraft." Well, the Air Force, they wanted it back. So we found it, got the information off that we needed but we couldn't get out so we had to walk home through enemy territory. But it was a classified mission, obviously it's no longer classified, we all know what the aircraft is. But it was an interesting mission, I had five men with me and we all got home okay. Kind of tough physically, raining all the time and they couldn't come pick us up because the chopper couldn't fly below 1200 feet.

And once we got through the last mine field, a group of engineers cleared the road, took the mines off the road and we were to be brought home by truck. We had to walk until we got to a safe area. But we had to swim a river, which we were swimmers anyway and with the material we brought with us. I had one man go across with a rope, you know, and swim- my lead swim, scout swimmer, went across with a rope, anchored it, we all came across with the equipment. Then we had to get through the mine field, two mine fields. But we got through it okay, got through the mine- and then we got picked up by some trucks from another base, brought us home. We hadn't eaten in five days. Leeches and mosquitos and, hard time. You know we didn't, we didn't wear underwear or socks. We had no body armor. You wore a jacket and a pair of trousers and just boots. You lather your feet down with oil or salve. Usually when you came back, you had blisters and mosquitos and leeches and all that on you. There was no point in wearing underwear or socks, so that was what we wore, just a jacket and trousers. The rest of it was ammunition. Ammunition. So, we lived in the jungle, you know, lived off whatever we could. But they were very tough men, they could live in the jungle for days. We lived behind the lines and this aircraft was way behind the lines. It looked like it was, it was loaded with fuel the way it looks to me, and it looked like it was going over this ridge, this mountain ridge, and looked like it had hit the top of it because I saw it from the air, the explosion. It just burned the whole side of the mountain. Looked like it was full of fuel and it didn't make it over the top and just exploded, so we had to find that and among all of the stuff that was there, found what we were looking for. It was an interesting time. We got home. There was no mention ever made of that mission. But nowadays, they, they know what it is, the whole bit, but at the time it was all classified. A lot of stuff we did back in those days were classified, which nowadays kids look at it on Google or whatever it is.

Howe: What was it you found, are you allowed to say?

Capers: I just told you.

Howe: Just the aircraft?

Capers: Just the aircraft.

Howe: Okay. And you- because you had to walk out, what happened to the wreckage?

Capers: It stayed there. There was no point in, you know. You know, the Vietnamese had already pillaged it, whatever that was usable, you know, because it had been there. And a lot of it was overgrown with jungle growth. I saw it from the air. At first, they wanted us to parachute in and it was a hotdog mission. But, no, I'm not going to parachute in because, just drop me in by helicopter. They were to put me in at 500 feet, you know, we were all parachutists and all that, probably could have made it, but no. Just drop me in, get us about 10 feet. We can just jump out of the helicopter rather than us jumping in at night at 500 feet. Then I've got to get my team back together and some will

probably land in trees and be spotted by the enemy, so we elected to go in by helicopter. Unfortunately they didn't pick us up. We were missing in action, nobody knew where we were. We had to power down our radios because, you know, the batteries were beginning to run out and nobody really knew where we were, whether we were alive or dead, so I just shut everything down because I figured we could make it. I knew where we were going. I knew it, but my troops obviously, they were a little concerned at first, you know, can we, because they hadn't been in the area. And I had the map and the compass, you know a magnetic compass you learn to shoot azimuth with this and that and find your way through the jungle. But I was a Sergeant, team leader, and my job was to get them home. I felt pretty good about that. It was a good engineering mission. We did everything we needed to do and we did it right. Run across some enemy. Run across a full-grown tiger, you know. But my point man, Jurowski, the Polish Mule we called him, tough kid, and he led us all the way. He was my point man. I just told him where I wanted to go and he got us there. Led us across the river and led us through the mine fields. Interesting guy, interesting story.

Howe: What did you eat while you were out there?

Capers: We didn't have anything to eat. We only had one day's rations. That was it. We were supposed to get picked up the next morning. You don't carry a lot of food, number one. Everything you carry is ammunition. We used to- our policy was you ate one, once a day. You carried what we called a 'Heavy,' one heavy, maybe a cheese and crackers and a little piece of canned bread. That's your meal for the day. And he might, in that can you might have beans and franks or something like that, a beef stew. That's it for a day. The rest things you've got grenades and ammunition and things you might need, medical supplies. So you know, you eat when you- you're out there four, five days and then you come back. Then you can eat, clean your weapons and those type of things. But while you're in the field, no, food doesn't matter, because all these guys are tough and trained to survive in any kind of terrain. They can survive in a jungle. They can survive in the mountains, and the rivers, oceans, they can do that. They're trained for that. That's why we put them through all the training, to see if they can handle extreme hardship. And not only the physical part but the psychological part because a lot of the men will break down. Not a lot of them, maybe not my guys. They will, they will crack under the pressure but I wouldn't let my men crack because I won't crack. As long as I'm going and moving, they will follow me. If you train them properly, they will follow you, follow you to hell and back if they believe in you.

Howe: I read that later in '67 you were in command of a platoon. At that time had you made it into the officer ranks?

Capers: Yeah. I was a 2nd Lieutenant at that time. I had gotten what we used to call a battlefield commission in '66. You know, I went from Staff Sergeant to 2nd Lieutenant in about five minutes. The Colonel called me in, had me sign some papers and I raised my right hand

and, you know, the whole bit, they pronounced me an officer and a gentleman by Congress. So I went from 2nd- I went from Sergeant to 2nd Lieutenant.

Howe: What's the story behind that?

Capers: Well, most of the officers we had we gone. You know, the young kids coming out of OCS and, you know, they were good guys and I loved them all, but we had, Lieutenant O'Donough got killed. We had another young officer who was coming to us, his name was Fain, now he got killed. Another kid down in First Force, Barnes, he got killed. Kadison, he wasn't killed, he was shot and I'd been with them since '65, this has, you know, been a while. And I had a team, then I had a platoon. And then as other members, officers, were killed, I took over their units. I took over what was left of Spainhour's patrol. I took over what was left of O'Donough's platoon. And I'd been there for a while, and you know. I'd been in for ten years, the guys believed in me, and I was a Sergeant and so, I guess stability and leadership and I kept them close to me and did what I needed to do to help them out. So, when I got commissioned, there was no real difference in my job title. But it was nice to be an officer and my guys were happy for me. And, you know, I got a chance to go to the Officer's Club which I had never been in, and things that an officer would traditionally do. A lot of administrative work, which I didn't know about because I never went to OCS or Basic School, never had any officer's training. I didn't have a college degree. But I was loyal and my leaders recognized that I could probably do this. I had applied for the commissioning program back in '64 and I got turned down, turned down twice. They said I was considered but not selected, which meant that they weren't looking for guys that looked like me back in those days. But now this is 1966 and the war isn't going good for us and we're losing a lot of men so we had to go down and it wasn't just me. A lot of NCO's were promoted to officer rank. But I was in such a small group in Force Recon that, what else was I going to do? I stayed with my men and they stayed with me. We lost, we lost some men along the way. I had a couple chances to get transferred, do some easier things, but how do, how do you do that? How do you tell your men that you're going to a soft base so you can survive the war? How do you leave those wonderful young Americans out there without an officer? So I stayed. I stayed. My wife wasn't too happy about it. Because I told her in all those nice letters, you know, I'm going to be safe and I'll come home to you. I couldn't leave my guys, when I got transferred the last time at Khe Sanh, I couldn't leave. It just, I know all the promises I made, how much I loved my wife and my son, but these are my sons now. They're following me. They believe in me. What happens to them if I leave and somebody comes in and gives them some mission and gets them all killed? Couldn't, I couldn't live that way. So I stayed and, and we came home together, the ones that lived.

Howe: So you received recognition for certain actions that occurred in the spring of '67?

Capers: I received a Silver Star in 2010 at the Seal Base in Tampa, Florida. The Secretary of the Navy gave me a Silver Star. I had been nominated for the Medal of Honor in 2007. My

congressman decided there was enough evidence to support a nomination for the Medal of Honor and obviously I didn't get it. It was a little bit difficult to get a Medal of Honor and we didn't have all our ducks in line, and so they gave me a Silver Star instead.

Howe: Where were you located during this time? Where was it that you had been operating?

Capers: There's a place called Phu Loc, Vietnam. We were sent out on a special mission and I was attached to another group. I was sent out with another group and things didn't go well for us. After four days, you know, we were trying to finish our mission and a larger force- we run across a larger force and a, a claymore mine, command detonated claymore mine, went off, and all of us were wounded. My war dog was killed right in front of me and my right leg was broken and my point man lost a leg. My radioman lost a leg. My M-79 man lost a kidney. Everybody was wounded. And, you know, part of that is that, to get out of there, you know, we had to back away and get to the helicopter that was circling above the rescue helicopter. We were all wounded now and the mission was over. So we had to go home. That was my last mission during the war in Vietnam. That was at a place called Phu Loc. We did okay, you know, we- it wasn't one of my finest moments. I wish we hadn't been wounded, and it was after four days and it was a tough, tough four days. But we, we survived and got out of there and a good, good bit of that is part of the, the story, you know. They seem to think I did something extraordinary, but I really didn't. I didn't do anything extraordinary. I just did what I was trained to do and kept my men alive. We fought a pretty good battle. There was a bunch of them, a little more than I would have liked to run across, but I was given a medal for Conspicuous Gallantry. That's what the Medal of Honor stated. They wrote up a lot of things but they down-graded it to a Silver Star. There's a little bit more to that, but you know.

Howe: So I'm interested. What do you, what do you recall about those four days, what do you recall about where you were sent, what you guys were doing and coming back, how you got back?

Capers: Well there's a lot of distance between that, getting out there. I was called in to go out there and blow an enemy base camp, part of the mission. And I was with a group called, what were they called, they were, they, they lived out in the villages with the Vietnamese. They were Marines, lived out in the villages and they helped them with medical things, and pretty much like the Special Forces guys would do, you know, out there. I'll think of the name in a minute. But I was with them at first and they gave me some information on the area I'd be operating in. Then a Marine battalion that was dropped in out there, we were supporting them and they were supporting us, 326. We had an altercation the second day and we were given credit for twenty killed. You know they gave you KIA, WIA and all that. The war was about a war of attrition. In other words, if we killed more of them than they killed of us, we're going to win. General Westmoreland wanted to know how many we killed, so we had twenty confirmed kills

that we know we killed the second day. Lost a man the first day. And the next day we had seven contacts. The next four days we battled against them for four, for- close up. We had four confirmed contacts, that's when you initiate combat against an enemy force. That's contact. So we had to deal with that. It's hard to put all of that in one, in one sentence. And then on the last day, the claymore mine went off, command detonated claymore mine and it got pretty nasty. As I said, they gave me a medal for that, but, you know, I was doing my job, and fired a few rounds and, you know, best I can remember, I was- when, when the command detonated claymore went off, my right leg was broken. I was hit fourteen, fifteen times, you know, shrapnel and things of that nature. My left leg was fractured, and, you know, I was hit in the stomach, places like that. It wasn't a pretty sight. My Corpsman, he's the one I talked about last night, Billy Ray Smith, he saved my life and lives of everybody out there, pretty much. He treated everybody. Young man from Rye, Alabama, and he jumped on me and gave me a shot of morphine, and treated all my men. Crawled around and treated everybody and we redistributed our ammunition so we could hold on. And it was my decision that we don't need to be here anymore, our job was done, we're going home now. But the problem was how do we get from that point to the helicopter? Because everybody was wounded and bleeding all over the place and it wasn't exactly a pretty sight, you know, to describe that in real details, I don't think anybody wants to hear that. Nick lost his leg and my leg was basically saved when I got back to the, back to the hospital. But you know, bleeding all the way and a lot of the guys was in shock and we gave out as much morphine as we could. A lot of screaming, yelling going on, a lot of pain. A lot of firing, throwing grenades, and violent, bloody, smelly and it was raining, it was almost like savagery. You know it's almost like something that kept me awake many years. I mentioned at the beginning of the interview, I have PTSD, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. I think they're dropping the disorder part now. But many nights at Bethesda Hospital, I walked those same trails. I could hear my men screaming, you know. I could hear the rounds go off. It never goes away. Just like I remember the last breath my son took or the last breath my wife took, you know I remember those things and it keeps me awake at night, they gave me medication for it now. Scream Depression they call it. But for all those nights at Bethesda when I lay there by myself, couldn't move, couldn't urinate, couldn't go to the bathroom, and in pain and nobody gave a damn. Nobody really cared about the Vietnam veterans. Nobody really cared. So you try to survive it but you've got the memories. But it's always that wonderful wife and my child who was there with me, to hold my hand and say, "It's going to get better." And it was always my God that says, "I will walk with you. I will raise you up out of this bed. You will walk out of this hospital." I didn't walk out, they took me out in a wheelchair. But I left because of my faith in God and the part I talked about last night at the speech, was that when we got aboard a helicopter, we had to walk to the helicopter, there was a lot of stuff going on. And a lot of pain. I was losing so much blood, I could hear the blood squishing in my boots. It was just running out of my body and I didn't have enough bandages to put on it. And my corpsman didn't have any more bandages and everybody else was bleeding

also. Young men, strong men, but now we're at the breaking point. Four days of savage battle and now we're going home, not in defeat, but the chopper landed, small chopper, and I had to get what was left of my team on this chopper. Got everybody onboard and my war dog, King, who was killed right in front of me. He was a huge German Shepherd dog, been with us for a long time. Had it not been for him there, I would have been hit much worse. But he's dead. So I got everybody on the chopper and I put my dog on the chopper. He was a Marine, he had a dog tag, he had a serial number, he had a name. I wasn't going to leave him behind. I said, "Put my dog on the helicopter." And then it was just too much weight so I got off to lighten the weight. The crew chief, who was on the helicopter, pulled me on and we went up about maybe six feet, but the dog is on the helicopter, everybody is onboard now. A lot of screaming, yelling, the chopper is trying to rattle and get off the ground. He pulled me on and went up about six feet and then came back down and crashed. I figured this is not good. I looked up and there was another chopper circling above us, flying suppression fire. So I figured, if I can't get out of here, maybe they'll come pick me up. But my men have got to make it. I don't need to be considered now. So I got off the chopper a second time. The crew chief shook his head, pulled me back on, went up again, about eight feet and crashed back down. Figured, well this ain't going to work today. But all my men were on board. There's so much blood on the chopper, it's running out the chopper now. I'm standing there with my rifle as a crutch, bleeding in pain, figuring that, you know, maybe this is the way it goes. The third time, the chopper starts up again, this is the third time we're going up now. I'm moving toward, you know, moving toward somewhere. The crew chief reached out and grabbed me and pulled, pulled me onboard the third time. It didn't look good, but it started going up, wobbling, and I'm holding on to the crew chief, he's holding on to me. It went up, did a 360 and sailed away. And we flew to, I think it was A Med or maybe a D Med and it crashed in the hospital yard, came down hard. I saw blood wash out of the chopper when it crashed. It never flew again. All my men survived. I brought my dog's body home. The part I told the group last night was that it was God who flew that helicopter. Both the pilots I'm told were shot, it was out of gas, banged around, you could hear it wobbling. So who flew the helicopter? I believe that when I was at Khe Sanh and things were bad, I fell on my knees and asked God for help. Said, "God, where are you tonight? I'm suffering here. I need help. If you're God, show me a sign. Hit me with a bolt of lightning, do something to show me that you're God." God didn't speak to me that night, but that day I was on the helicopter, God said to me, "I heard you the first time. I heard you. And I can fly this helicopter. I don't care if it doesn't have any gas. I don't care if it doesn't have a pilot. I can fly this helicopter," and spun the helicopter round, flew through the rain and crashed. God was flying the helicopter. I believed that then and I believe it now, because God can do anything. That was my faith. Now, he didn't save my wife. He didn't save my child. But they're both with him now. My son is no longer blind. He's no longer special needs. He'll never be hungry. He'll never be cold. He'll never be abused. My wife doesn't have cancer now.

They are both with God. And I'm here now to tell this story and do God's will. Because he flew the helicopter and he's been carrying me since that day.

Howe: You came back. Where did you land? Where were you treated?

Capers: At the hospital in Phu Bai. The helicopter landed in the hospital yard. There was a red-cross sign out there for a hospital, and that's where we landed. I never saw the pilots, never got a chance to thank them. But someone a couple years ago showed me a picture of the helicopter. It never flew again. It was one of those mysteries, it had no gas, and all those things. How'd that happen? I told him how it happened. God was flying the helicopter. Choose to believe it, not believe it, doesn't matter to me because I was aboard it. This isn't something somebody told me. So we landed in Phu Bai and then from Phu Bai, we went to Da Nang. We went to Japan. We flew from Japan to Alaska and flew from Alaska to Virginia. Then they took us on in Bethesda Hospital. It took us five days to get home.

(Long pause)

Howe: I had one... During that, during that experience, especially after you and your men were severely wounded, what was it you believe kept you going through those tough experiences?

Capers: Couple things. Number one, I was an African-American, first African-American to be commissioned in Special Operations, Marine Corps. People expected a lot out of me. They put a lot of faith in me. Even when I'd been turned down for a commission before, they gave me a commission. I didn't have, didn't have a degree, never went to OCS or Basic School. OCS is Officers Candidate School. But when they needed me, even with all the hard times I had, challenges. When they needed me, I didn't say no. I stepped up. But I also knew when they commissioned me, there would be hopefully many others coming behind me. I couldn't disappoint them, so when I was in trouble, what would the Marine Corps say if they gave a young Black man a commission and he's in the middle of battle and he fails? What does that mean for the other kids coming behind me? Now we've got Admirals and Generals, and young, African-Americans, men and women, because they got an opportunity like I got an opportunity. I didn't have the opportunity that they had. I'm not sure if I even wanted it, but when they give me the commission and now I'm in the middle of battle, men are depending on me, and had I failed, innocent men would have died. But I said I'm going to stay in the battle. I could have evacuated my troops. My mission was done, it's the last day, we'll go home. But what about this battalion out there? What about that mission? What do I say if I say I'm taking my men out, and a thousand men die because I'm not their eyes and ears anymore? And the first things they'll say that, "Well, we knew those African-Americans, you know, one reason we didn't want them in there, because they couldn't handle it." Well I did handle it. But I thought about it, briefly. I can't fail. That kept me, as I was

bleeding, we could have got out earlier, but what do you say? So you... subconsciously you think about those things and the question is, did I make a decision to call in artillery on my position? We were in bad shape, so I called in artillery on my position because I knew where it was on the map. We were in close quarters and I wasn't quite sure exactly where I was and what was around us. So I called in artillery on the position where I knew exactly where I was and I knew that artillery would give you about a hundred meters grace. They wouldn't normally drop it right on your position. They would normally walk it back to where you are. But where I knew where I was, either they're going to kill us out here or the rounds will kill us. I called the artillery on my position because I knew that they would ordinarily give us about a hundred meters and they did that. And that give us some breathing room, they backed off. But did I make a conscious decision to call in the artillery? Well they said, "Well if you were wounded and you were losing blood, and knew I was unconscious for a moment or two," I don't know how long. But, you know, when the mine went off, I wasn't in too good shape. It knocked me down and I was trying to reassess my position. I could hear my guys screaming and all the stuff going on around me. But the investigators asked me, did I make a conscious decision to make that decision to stay out there, to stay in the fight? Yes, I did make a conscious decision. It was my- I could, could have left but I didn't because I knew years later when they investigated the Battle of Phu Lai- Phu Bai, what they would have said. Now they, they give me medals for it. But had I failed, they would have said some bad things about us as a people and I couldn't afford to let that happen. Those are the things that went through my mind very- I was always aware of who I was. And when I went into meetings, people looked at me, 'Well this guy is a Negro.' When I went on diving missions, they'd never seen a black diver before. Never seen a Master Diver before. A Master Parachutist before. Or a Martial Arts Sensei because we'd never had a chance to get into those things. Now, I got an opportunity, I can't fail now for the generation that will come after me. Like I tell the young kids nowadays, you've got to do a good job not only for yourself, for the Marine Corps, but for this country. This country is worth fighting for, it's worth saving. That's my message. You know, and I thought about some difficult times you know, but it didn't matter now because I've got my men there with me. If I don't make the right decision, they're going to die. What do I tell their parents? What do I tell their children? Well, a lot of them didn't have a chance to have children. They were young guys. Didn't see the World Series. Didn't see the Super Bowl. Never had a chance to get married as I did, and watch his first child take his first walks or go to the park. They left it over there. Those 36 men I talked about, they died in the jungles of North Vietnam, on the border of North Vietnam. Never got to go to Fort McHenry and have them sing the Star Spangled Banner. So, I'm lucky in a lot of ways. They were not so lucky, but they gave everything they had. They left it all on the battlefield and I couldn't fail those guys and now I can't fail their memory. But what does it have to do with my being a black officer? It doesn't make any difference anymore. You're an officer and sometimes I never even like the term "black officer." I was an officer. I was a Marine officer. It took me a while to get

there, I had ten years in before they gave me a...I was older, a lot of these kids come out of OCS. I was almost thirty years old, but I got a commission. I had gray hair. And there were young kids coming out of, twenty years old, coming out of OCS and I had to wait my time. But when I got that opportunity, I didn't fail. I didn't fail. That's what I was thinking about in the middle of that battle, briefly. Didn't have much time to think about a lot of things, but I knew who I was and a lot of people in that battalion knew I was a black officer. They saw me out there. The enemy knew I was an African-American, they knew that. They would have loved to have had me as a trophy. I wouldn't give them that satisfaction. My men were tough. They were brave. They would go anywhere, fight anything and they believed they would win. And for the most part, we didn't lose that battle there. We came out on our own terms. We walked out.

Howe: You talked about remembering those that you served with and telling the story to honor them. Who else specifically, amongst your ranks, performed above and beyond the call of duty?

Capers: They all did. And fortunately, I did see some got recognized. Matter of fact, we were down in Tampa in 2010, they also gave Bronze Stars to my team. My War Dog handler. Sergeant Yerman, who was my assistant, with me the whole way. Craig Bowe, Jack Wright from Texas. We all got awards. When I got mine, they got theirs. Those are guys- It's hard to differentiate, you know. It's hard to say, well who did this because we were a team, you know. Everybody had a specific job. We were not there to be heroes, individually or collectively, and to say this guy did something specific above and beyond; they all did something above and beyond. It would be disrespect to the guys who didn't come home. Sure you can, as the battle goes, you can see men do heroic things, but they don't look at it that way; they do it for the team. So, I wouldn't dishonor that whole platoon or whole unit by saying this person was above that person. We all helped each other out. I'm sure there was some acts of heroism but, you know it took them forty years to recognize us. I got the Silver Star in 2010; the battle took place in 1967. For a long time, nobody cared about us. They didn't say, "Thanks for a good job." They didn't give us any yellow ribbons or people said nice things to us. It took them for years to put that memorial up in D.C.. So, it's hard for me now to say there was one particular person, I'm sure there were but I don't want to do that because everybody out there did their jobs. They bled right along beside me, we all cried together. We helped each other out. And, we all got the medals except they didn't give the whole team the Silver Star. They gave this to me, which I wanted everybody to get the appropriate award. But the Marine Corps award system is a little bit difficult. Things that maybe somebody else would do and get a Medal of Honor for, they might give us a Certificate of Commendation, something like that. We don't get the same, because they think that's who we are. They think Marines are supposed to do these kind of things. I don't have a problem with that.

Howe: Makes sense. So you recovered in Bethesda and fortunately this is close to where your wife was waiting for you.

Capers: Yeah. It was in Baltimore, yeah.

Howe: Okay. How long did that take?

Capers: A year, I was in the hospital about a year. I mean, the recovery process took years. Of course she had no knowledge of what I'd been through and the hardships and losing men in battle and, and she knew it wasn't a regular tour because I came home wounded. I had to learn to walk again, went from a wheelchair to crutches, a cane, therapy. Putting blocks together for the psychiatrist. The word association tests. Them showing me pictures with pornography in it to see if I could identify it. I guess they thought I was certifiably insane because I really couldn't remember what was real and what wasn't real. I was beginning to see some of the men in my room talking to me, but they weren't there. Maybe because I wanted them to be there. A lot of visions of battle, of sights and sounds of battle. The nights I lay there in pain, in my own feces, my own urine. Waiting for the nurses to give me a shot morphine. And thinking I'm in battle, but I'm in Bethesda. I had to go through all that and I hadn't been showered. I think they shaved me once in Japan. But bloody, still had the blood of my men mixed together with my own blood on my hands and my body. Took them a while to clean me up. I was wounded so many times, they couldn't count them all. And it took a while for them to, for it to heal. They didn't remove seven metal fragments, that's still there today. So I had to go through all of that and wait for my wife to come visit me and my son was- they brought him the first time but didn't bring him back. He was a little bit too young at the time. My wife would come and sit with me and sometimes the nurses, when they got off duty, they would come and sit with me. They would wash my hands, wash the blood off my hands. Sometimes they shaved me. And sit, sit there and sing to me. Sing me lullabies, I remembered from my child. Would hold my hands and, and I would fall asleep. Those were the days in Bethesda. They went by slowly. And I went to surgeries after surgeries and blood transfusions. I had more things going on in my body with leech bites and all this other stuff. My blood was poisoned, living all this time in the jungle. My skin was screwed up. I weighed 125 pounds when I got home. And, you know, so you go through those things but time goes by slowly. There were days where I looked out- I was on the 14th floor- I looked out the window, said, you know, "Maybe if I just get out the window and jump out, it would be all over." You go through those things. And you feel like nobody loves you anymore. There was a day when my wife had to do something with my son and she didn't get there. I was angry, "Where were you?" You know. "You were probably out on a date. Why weren't you here?" Stupid stuff. But she went through all of that with me and patient with me. Read the Bible to me, you know. Sit by my bed and nurses would come in, the doctors would come in, the psychiatrists would come in, the Red Cross guys would come in, the little Candy Striper girls would come in. And sometimes the groups would come in and sing

to me and there were days I didn't want them there. I didn't want to look at them. And sometimes my room would smell foul because I couldn't go to the bathroom. I was ashamed. I felt like an animal. But I'm a human being, I've got feelings. I'm living in this foul room here, but then they would come in and help me out, clean me up. Then I felt good. My mother-in-law brought me an old black and white TV down there and I used to watch "Star Trek." It was a new program back in those days. So I was beginning to feel a little bit more human, you know. So, I went through that and you know post-traumatic stress and, you know, strain of battle, it hurts. Then you think about the men you lost. I wondered if I could have done a better job as an officer. What were they saying about me out there? But my room was secured and sometime they wouldn't let folks in to see me because all my wounds were open and you could smell the burning flesh. Burned flesh has a horrible smell. You know, all my leg- well, they just had to drain them all. They would open them up, I had so many of them on me. They had take- they would take cotton and stuff down in the, in the holes so wouldn't get infected. And they left this cotton in these open wounds. Then they had to go in there and take it out and put in new cotton. And the pain was, was excruciating. And you could smell the flesh. There's nothing like burned flesh, human flesh, and I smelled that all day long. I just wanted to vomit, I couldn't stand the smell of my own flesh. And you go through that and then eventually, you know, I had what we call a near-death experience, which for a moment, I believe I was dead. I remember specifically, doctors and nurse came in one morning, or what I envisioned to be the doctors and nurse, stood by bed and said, "Lieutenant, we're here to talk with you." And the male said to me, "We have to tell you that you've been wounded in battle and we're here to tell you that you're dead. And if you look to your right, you will see God." So what I was hearing them say to me, real figures standing there talking to me, and the nurse had a clipboard and it could have been a regular nurse that I'm imagining, but when they said, "Look to your right," I looked to my right and I saw this big ball of light, big ball of light, and I was being drawn to this ball of light. Then I heard this loud noise, extremely loud noise. I was looking down this long tunnel, whatever it was, I can't really describe it accurately but I heard this big sound. I saw the light and then I saw the sound. Because they told me, "You will see God, that is God there." The next thing I knew, I was standing in the middle of the floor, all my wounds had broken loose, I was standing in a blood of- a pool of blood and they were telling me that, "Lieutenant, get back in the bed. Get back in the bed." I'm thinking, "Where am I? Am I in heaven? Where am I?" All these things that you go through in the healing process and you can't make- I've heard of near death experiences, but I'd never experienced it like was there. And for a moment I thought I was paralyzed. You know, I thought I couldn't move. All those things, the horrible things you, you go through, they were- They told me I was wounded and I would see God. These are things that I went through as a part of that long process and daily, as I said, I saw some men who I knew were gone, standing beside my bed. And then of course when the psychiatrists come down to see me, they would take me up and they'd go through the, the healing process. And they would come down and visit me and, you

know. Finally got through it. Eventually they let me go home for a short period of time to visit my wife and my son. Then they would call me when I was at home to make sure I'm okay. I was not a very well person. They...I wasn't the only one who had PTSD. Back in the old days they called it "Battle Fatigue," and all that. I guess they call it PTSD now, but. It was a long process, very painful, but I had to believe in God, had to believe in my family and all the people come to support me. But eventually I came out of there. Then I would go back and visit the guys who were not so lucky, on my crutches, go back and visit them. I walked the hospital wards, and sometimes I'd sit there with them when they were having their nightmares. They were calling for backup, calling out for the wounded, calling for the corpsman. And I would sit by their beds and hold their hands and tell them, "It's going to be okay." This is after I was released from the hospital because they needed somebody there. So all these things were going on during that long period until I was able to function again, then the Marine Corps decided to let me keep my commission. A lot of the guys who got theirs were reverted back to the enlisted rank, former enlisted ranks. But because they said I had done a pretty good job, they wrote me a letter saying, "We're going to continue you on, in the Marine Corps, but you have to be completely healed and you have to pass the PFT test." And so eventually I worked hard, got off the crutches and started light exercise. I'd go to the whirlpool and all those things and light exercise and eventually, over a period of time, I was asked- I was able to pass the PFT test. They let me stay on. They made me a 1st Lieutenant, and they made me a Captain and they made me a Major and probably would have made me a Colonel, but I decided to, to retire. It was time to go.

Howe: The Marine Corps PFT is-

Capers: Physical Training Test-- Physical Fitness Test.

Howe: The, I think, the most rigorous of the services.

Capers: It is. Now when you go to special groups like the Rangers, the Seals, and you know, they've got their own special things that they do, based on their missions. But the Marine Corps is an old standard. You've got to be able to run the three miles, and you've got to do a hundred pushups or whatever it is today. I think it's sit-ups. There's other little things they put in to take a measure of you and see what you're made of. But it is very rigorous and very demanding. And if you don't pass it, or if you don't look physically fit, the Marine Corps will get rid of you. You have to fit your uniform and look like a Marine. And perform like a Marine. If you're overweight or, or can't get with the program, we don't need that. We can tolerate it sometimes, but it's not what we really want. And they didn't want a guy like me in, who couldn't run the PFT test. So I had to be able to pass it in order to continue on because I didn't have a career on the outside. I'd been in the Marines since I was 17, 18 years old and I wanted to stay in and they allowed me to stay in but with very specific guidelines. 'You have to do this. If you don't, we're going to retire you.' I didn't have enough time to- I didn't have twenty

years in at that time; so I'd have to get out of the Marine Corps. They'd give me a couple of bucks, but. I loved the Marine Corps and I kind of wanted to, hoped that I could get back to full strength and I did.

Howe: Did you go back to Force Recon?

Capers: I did. I went back for three years, from 1975 to 1978. I went back as Commanding Officer of Second Force Reconnaissance Company. It was my third tour. And my wife really wasn't too pleased about that one. But she again... We were going to retire the next year. See, I'd come in in '56 and I could have retired in it- for twenty years, they let you retire after twenty years. I'd come in in '56 so '76 I could have retired. But then we had some issues with the Russians and other places and they came down and invited me to lunch and, you know, Force Reconnaissance is a sort of special organization and they predicted that we were to need to have a special group like us around with a good commander. And I told the Colonel that, you know, I had an idea to retire next year, you know, '76. He said, "Well it's a matter of national security and we hope you'll think about it." And I went home, talked to my wife and we were, we were looking for a house and all those things, you know, and going to enjoy the years and, so I asked her to go with me one more time. So I volunteered, went back to Third Force. I retired in June of 1978. My third tour in Force Reconnaissance. I was almost 40 years old, still making parachute jumps. (Laughs) But you- this was a new group of guys. I recruited them, I trained them, they expected me to lead them. And, you know, what are you going to do? The same thing in Khe Sanh, other places I was at. And I loved them. I liked to think then, I was a Mustang, you know, one of the old guys and they loved being around me, hear the stories and they followed me wherever I needed to go and whatever I needed to do. I loved them and I recruited some pretty good officers. And, but then there come I time when, I made my last parachute jump and it wasn't a good jump. And I realize now, I hit the ground so hard, sort of staggered me for a moment and a young kid run over and said, "Major, you okay?" You know, he'd already hit the ground, wrapped up his parachute, and I'm still struggling trying to get up. I knew then it was time to go, you know. It's time for the young kids. So he says, "Sir, you, you need a hand?" I said, "No, son. I'm okay. The old man is okay." I said, "Call the jeep for me." So I went back and I got to thinking, you know, it's a young man's game. So, then I, I put in my retirement papers. But there was other things that occurred. I had a man drown at Oslo Beach and I took serious responsibility for it and I almost lost four guys in a nuclear sub up in New London, Connecticut, almost drowned. And this kid from the Army broke his leg on one of my night jumps. So I was taking, you know, another kid [???? 2:34.06.5 >embolized?] in a training tank down in Key West, Florida. We did a lot of water work back in those days. So as my troops were, were not necessarily wounded, but injured, it's a high risk business. I just didn't want to take the bad news anymore. And so my wife and I talked about it, and we retired, had a wonderful life together. We did fifty good years of marriage together. My son was living at home with us, and wonderful life when we

retired. A lot of fun things. And ran out of time. Ran out of time. I lost her at 2:30 in the afternoon, June 28th, 2009. I took her rings off and kissed her goodbye. And they took me out the room where she died and I got on a plane and buried my son and my wife up in Arlington, Virginia. Left there and come home to an empty house and I got on a plane and went to California and lived in a hotel. Finally got an apartment and, you know, God again says, "I'm going to take you home." And I did come back to North Carolina. I'm still in the same home now, my wife and I built. I can feel their presence there. Yeah. And so, all in all son, it wasn't a bad deal. I married the woman I loved all my life, had a wonderful son, many friends and nowadays they come to visit the old man and nowadays young people like you seem to be interested in what I have to say. That wasn't- who was interested in what I had to say years ago? When I got off the plane, we lost four men coming home from Alaska, didn't make the trip. They weren't my men, they were on the MEDEVAC aircraft. So there were things that occurred and, but all in all, I'm doing okay, you know. I get the chance to come here and meet some nice people, and your interview is fine. You don't need to worry about me, you know, I'm just telling you what I can remember. Just an old warrior right now that's getting an opportunity to tell a story. I can't remember what yesterday was, tell you the truth, but you're asking me what it was back in 1965 or whatever it was. But that's okay, because nothing is, you know, you- you're doing your job, you're doing a great job, asking the right questions. I wish I could be more specific, but the years and the pain and the realities of life that I've lived and the life I live now. But to get an opportunity to come up here, such a sumptuous place, people walk around, they look like they belong, they feel comfortable because those men in Phu Loc and Phu Bai and Da Nang and the SLF, the POW camp, Phu Bai, they all made this happen so we could sit in this wonderful place today and enjoy the freedoms that we were given. And they're doing it today in Afghanistan, different places around the world, places we don't even know of. So we can sleep at night, we can sit here and be so presumptuous that we know it all. But that's okay, that's what Americans are. We're a little bit, you know, we're a little full of ourselves because we've got these wonderful guys out there that makes it happen and sometimes we don't thank them enough. We hear about the VA hospitals, how they, people were dying on the waiting lists, all those things, we owe these kids more than that. The country owes them more than that. But unfortunately, who stops a veteran and say, "Thanks." I was in the airport yesterday coming up here and a gentleman stopped and said, "Thanks for your service." That never happened before. I've been walking around this building and who stops to say, "Welcome, Major,"? You did, some of your compatriots did that. They don't know what's in my heart, how hard it's been for me, especially a person who looks like me, coming up through the years that I come up through. They don't know about the, the bales of cotton that I picked and the tobacco that I cropped and the hogs that I slopped and the places I had to walk by because I could read that said "white." I knew I had-couldn't sit in the front of that bus. I knew my place, until that changed. Because we made it change, men like Martin Luther King made it change. I will never be a second class citizen, never will be. When I left home,

my father took me to the train station. The Marine Corps took us over to give us a meal. They give you a meal before you go off to Parris Island. I couldn't eat up in the dining room with the other Marines, but a few black Marines. They took us down in the basement, in the basement, a dark basement and brought us a plate of food. I'm going off to fight for my country, maybe die for my country, but I couldn't eat up with the other, other customers. But you know, as I sat there wondering, down the steps come a young Naval officer. He sat down with us, the black Marines, handed us each a Bible and said, "Young men, we appreciate what you're doing and this day shall pass. One day it won't be like this, it won't be like this. You'll be welcome upstairs. One day you may own this whole place. You have faith." Stood up and walked away. I carried that with- to boot camp with me, a Navy Chaplain. How could I doubt God? How could I doubt this country? Because there are men and women who want us to succeed. I've been one of the lucky ones.

Howe: I don't know how to follow that... except to ask two questions. My last two questions. Through it all, what has been your proudest moment?

Capers: My wife and my child, obviously. When my son got out of, he went to, they took us to Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. He had cataracts and he had, had no sight at all. And when I came back from overseas, we took him to Johns Hopkins and they had surgery there and in his left eye, he had some sight. His right eye remained totally blind, but he had a little sight in his left eye. And we brought him home from the hospital and I was holding him, he'd never seen his father, never seen his father. And I was holding him and he reached up with his hand and felt my nose and felt my face. I was so proud of him then because he was seeing his father for the first time. But he recognized my face because he had felt my face-many days, I'd come home from work and I'd lay the baby on my chest and he would feel my nose, my beautiful nose, and he'd feel my face, but he never saw me. That day, from Johns Hopkins Hospital, he felt my face, he looked at me, laid his head on my chest and he smiled. He was smiling at his father. After he felt my face, "I know this guy. I can see him now." I was so proud, I couldn't stop crying. And when he died, in 2003, he was holding onto my face. He died of appendicitis, in the emergency room and I passed him off to God. My proudest moment wasn't to do with battles or wars and great accomplishments, it was being a father and a loving husband. I was holding my wife's hand when she took her last breath. Those are moments that I cherish, not taking of human lives, not hearing men scream in battle, but those moments you cherish which keeps me going today. I'm so honored that my son was able to see me. The man who left him and went to war and he was there when I come back. I was there when he took his last breath. But you see, the thing is, he'll never be hungry. He will never be cold. He'll never have to worry if anybody's was taking care of him or if he was ever be abused because he's with God now. His mother's with God. She didn't have cancer in her body anymore, she's no longer sick, she's no longer in pain, she doesn't have to wait for the morphine shots, my son is no longer blind. Those are my

proudest moments that I realize that God is good, in his own way. I'd rather they be here with me today but they're with God now and I got you young men here keeping me company. You have no idea how much I appreciate this. It means a lot to me, to allow an old guy like me tell his story in the way that I can only remember. I wish all the other young men had the opportunity that you have. You are very well educated, very well-spoken. You have a good sense of responsibility and you want to tell the story right, I can sense that. You're worried that, 'Well gee, am I asking the right questions?' When the old man leaves, 'Gee, I wish I'd asked him this or wished I'd said that,' but you nailed it, you did good. You did good. And I don't say that because it sounds good. The Major never tells you anything he doesn't believe, because I don't fear you. I fear no man God put on this Earth, because God is on my shoulder. What I tell you, you'll remember these words years later. You'll say, "An old man came to me one day and he told me this." One day when you're sitting with your grandchildren, you'll say, you know, "One day I heard him say this about God and duty and country and honor," all those things. You'll be able to tell, and you'll see this country change. Many years after I'm gone to Arlington with my wife and my son, you'll see things that will make you remember this day. Not because I told it to you, because you will feel it. If you don't, then I picked the wrong guy. If you don't feel something, I hope that you do and hope you'll pass it on to somebody else. And don't be afraid to feel it. This is what this is about. If you walk out of here, "Well, I did another interview today," then I've failed. Then I failed. But Jim Capers never fails. I didn't fail my wife, didn't fail my child and there were days when I felt like I failed my men, but now, God didn't fail me so I can't fail God. And having said that, I'm not sure what else I can tell you, son. If you've got another question you want to ask me, we can do that too. (Pause) I've got plenty of time. I'm not leaving until tomorrow.

Howe: Now, (long pause) I do have to say that this, and I, I have not said this in an interview. Not once. I've done at least forty so far. I've interviewed World War II vets, Korean, Korean War, Vietnam. This is the first time I've said this. This is the best interview that I've been privileged to be a part of.

Capers: Thank you. Means a lot. Means a lot to me because I'm going home to an empty house now in North Carolina, and I'll take this with me. It means a lot to me to be invited here. I didn't know about the interview until Dan told me later on. So I'm honored to be here. I see all your memorabilia around here, the Navy Seals, and all of the great things. I wasn't a great warrior, you know. I was just a person who come along and did my duty as God and my country asked me to do. But thank you for your compliment, it means a lot to me and I'm honored to be here. I've heard many things about your program over the years. It's, it's something that needed to be told, not necessarily from my point of view, but, you know, this is who I am. I can't make things up. I wish I (were) some great orator, I just tell you what I, what I feel and what I'm thinking as I'm speaking to you. And I hope there is a certain degree of appreciation for that, because I'm an older guy right now and my time is not long. But then God said, "No man shall know the hour nor

the day," and this is a day that I'm honored to be here. As I fly back home tomorrow, I'll take this wonderful trip with me. So I want to thank you. And having said that, I thank you for your compliments, it wasn't necessary, but thank you.

Howe: It's the truth.

Capers: Thank you, sir. It means a lot.

Howe: Is there any, anything else that you want to discuss? Anything else that you feel we, we may have missed? Anything that you feel as, needs to be said?

Capers: Well, your questions pretty much covered it. (Laughter from Howe.) You're, you're being, you've been- much that I could cover that you haven't already covered. You've done your homework.

Howe: Yeah. My last, my last one was going to be, why do you think it's important to tell your story, but you've been telling me the whole time and anyone, anyone listening to these words later on, if they can't get it from you, if they can't get why it's important, then again, we've been doing the wrong thing.

Capers: Well when you tell a story like this, you know, an oral history, as I mentioned, I heard these stories from folks whose families were slaves, in the cotton fields. They would stand around and talk about, you know, what it was like back in the day and many of them still had, you know, back in my day, there were people around who were not in slavery but they remember those days, these oral histories. Oral histories are so important. In 1961, I was deployed to a place called Zimbale's Jungle. And in these jungles, was a tribe of, called Negritos. They had moved from Africa something like two thousand years ago to an island off the coast of the Philippines. I was sent out there to live with this tribe of Negritos for a few weeks with my team. And we parachuted in and lived with them. We hunted with them, ate with them, fished with them, the whole bit. And I listened to their oral histories. They brought a history from two thousand years ago from Africa and they were telling the young people about these histories. They had no written language. They're called Negritos. So what we heard, in a way some of them spoke English. What we heard was a history that went back two thousand years ago. And what you're hearing now is a history that went back to the '30s, and they were telling, they have the young children around and they would be listening to these, to the elders. And they were Pygmies. The Elder was a little guy, he had a big stick and he walked along and long grey beard, I don't have a picture of him, but he was a leader. And he'd walk along with us and if he saw a poison plant, he'd look at it and say, "No." If he saw something that you'd need, for a stomach ache, he would show you and rub his stomach and say, "That's good, smile." There were things that we learned from them. Human beings, you know, homo sapiens, we have a way of learning from each other. So the oral histories have a place. I'm sure that the cavemen developed this. The Negritos developed it. My aunts and uncles developed it to tell us children what was it like on

the, in the cotton fields, my folks told me this. So, oral history is a noble service to mankind. Without young men like you, how would we tell the story? So to have an interest in this is an accomplishment. And we appreciate it because a lot of times we don't think we have something important to say. I didn't talk about these things for years, for years, because it was too painful to remember it. Now we've got bright young men like yourself and we've got the technology, you can record these for all of posterity. And I'm honored to be a part of that. I'm sure that there are men and women who've got great stories and I don't have that. I'm a simple person. I've always been, I like to say, relatively humble-humble, but I appreciate when someone has, shows an interest in me or my generation. Not so much because I'm an African American or because I'm this or that, it doesn't really matter, we're human beings. Been around, you know, what, a hundred and something thousand years nowadays? When the history books, I'm also, I love to watch The History Channel, so I read all this stuff there about how we've come to where we are today, but now we're recording it. You know, they used to write things in the sand and on caves and things like that, the caves in France. Isn't that amazing? They kept that alive. And nowadays, years later, people will hear your stories, your questions.

Howe: Your words.

Capers: But it wouldn't have been... happened if you hadn't had the initiative to read my bio and read the things that, that I've been privileged to be a part of. I have a monument in my backyard that I built, and I have the names in brass on that memorial back there. And each day when God allows me to live, I go back there and I pray for those individuals and I thank them for doing what they did to allow me to come home. It's a beautiful thing. I had it built, because I never want to forget. I never want to forget what those men meant to me and to this country. And when I have guests come over, they go back there, and I have a flower garden around it. And sometimes through the years, I've had some parents have come and family members and they, they thank me for remembering them. But I don't really need the memorial. They're here. They're here. You know, I played a song last night before I spoke, by an entertainer named Lee Greenwood. And he played a song, made a song called, "Proud to Be an American." When I was a commander, a little bit of showmanship maybe, I would sing with my troops. I would sing, "God Bless America." You know, I would have their families to my home. When they left the military service, I would write to them each a letter, thanking them for their service. I would write to their parents and thank their parents for giving their child to me for all those years to defend this great country. I gave them my number. "You can always call me. You served this country well and we'll, we won't forget you." Then unfortunately, when they went to the VA, they forgot. We fixed that, we're going to fix that now. We're going to forget that right- We'll, We won't, we won't forget those guys, and that's one reason I go out to my yard. I have a moment for my wife and my child and for those wonderful young men. They said so many things to me

as they took their last breath. They weren't necessarily all mine, but I knew them. They were not all in my particular team or unit, but I knew them, and we were all, and they knew me because as an African American, it wasn't hard to miss me. And some of them just came up to me and said, "I'm so glad to see you get a commission. I'm so happy for you." Because it made them feel proud that they've accomplished something, so how could I fail those young men now? So I had to keep going, had to stand tall and do what I needed to do. The things that some people would want to go out and get drunk, make a fool of themselves, I couldn't do that now because I'm representing the first of that line. There'd (never) been one of Jim Capers in Force Reconnaissance before me, as an officer, so I can't screw that up. Or there were days when, you know, in my business you couldn't have a drink twenty-four hours before you went on a dive mission or a parachute jump. I liked to have a drink or two, but I also recognized that I got a responsibility. When you accept that commission, it brings with it a lot of challenges and a lot of responsibility. So these are things that I considered along the way and with respect to your last question, what were there things that I, I bring forward? Lessons learned? Well, the things you've covered, you've done your homework. I mean, I can't really say much that you didn't prompt me on. And I mean, you can always be redundant and say things over and over again, but I don't see myself as any great hero. When I was down in Tampa and they read the citation and people came and they had a dinner for me and I'm thinking, 'It would have been nice to have my wife and my child here.' But I felt their presence. A lot of people came and they said nice things, they took me to dinner. It was a long time. Admiral Olsen, who was a senior Navy Seal, gave me, said some nice words. I was being honored, first time. It was forty something years later. They found me. My Congressman called me. My wife was alive then and he called and talked to her and said some nice words to me, and I'm thinking, 'Where have you guys been all these years?' But you know, you accept gratitude and thanks when it comes and I never looked for it. But I do remember my father and he would have been so proud. He was never, he never had an opportunity to enjoy my success. He was a wanted man, couldn't even use his own name. When, when I came home, banged up, there was a picture in the local paper about this Lieutenant Jim Capers. So my father's bosses saw the article and knew his name was Capers, never really knew what his first name was because he changed it a lot, still a wanted man. And they came down to where he was working, he was sitting on his lunch bucket. And they came down and said, "Do you know Lieutenant Capers?" My father said "Yes sir, that's my son." He said, "That's your son?" He said, "Yes sir, that's my son." "So how come you never told us that your son was an officer in the Marine Corps?" He didn't know what to say because he didn't want anybody to know who he was because he was a wanted man. He never came to any of my ceremonies. I tried to get him to go but he was always thinking that the police would come and get him. So I was honored that he did all those things to protect me. He was always worried that he was going to bring discredit on me. In the days we didn't have much money, he wouldn't eat his lunch. He'd bring it home to me so that I could have lunch for school. That's the kind of man he was. So those are things

that I think about now. I loved him so much and he was such a kind, gentle man, lost everything he had, but he lived to see me become a success. But he was always so humble around me because he wanted me to, to be the man that he was not allowed to be. He was a genius. I've never seen anybody like him that had the ability to recall. He could, just amazing, I was always amazed by his ability because he couldn't write, he could barely write his name, but he remembered everything. Everything around him he remembered. He could remember figures and things of this nature. He could- if you told him once, he'd remember it. He could quote the Bible. He could quote stuff that I had no idea, but maybe that's the way it was when you didn't have the mechanics of writing things down, you remembered what you heard, and that's how I learned a lot of things. Some of the things he said to me were so eloquent, so unbelievable. I have a tape of some of the things that he said to me. Yeah, a small tape. One day I sat down before he died of cancer. He come to visit me, I brought him down to visit me, to spend some time with me. And he sat at my kitchen table and I said, "Dad, tell me about the old days." And I turned the tape recorder on. And I had the tape, but I think when I moved to California, I'm not sure what happened to it. But yeah, he sat down and, mostly jokes. He was a funny man, he loved to tell jokes. Oh he was just the funniest, so- And I, you could hear me laughing on the tape and when I got to California, as I mentioned you know, I had lost everything, my home was gone, my wife was gone, my son was gone. And I would play that tape and hear him tell a joke. And that joke was so important to me. I would sit there for hours and, and listen to him talk about the old days, but he always had something good to say and some way to make me laugh. I'd be sitting there in the hotel laughing at the jokes. My father left those, he left that bit of humor to me and I carried that, it carried me some difficult days. I lived in California for three years. I was strong enough to come back home, but I didn't bring the tape home because his job was done now. "I got you home. You survived because I left you something to take you through those hard days. The hard days." I was in the hospital four times out there with the grief counseling, anger management. But I laughed along with him and when I was well, the laughter stopped. And I came home. Came home. But he brought me home. He took me to the train station and sent me off to boot camp. And he laughed with me in California until I was able to come home. I'll leave you with that.

Howe: I'd like to give you the Pritzker Military Museum and Library Challenge Coin.

Capers: Thank you.

Howe: You've seen those.

Capers: Yeah, I'm, I'm honored. I think I've got one here somewhere for you. Boy, this is really nice. I had one here somewhere. I'll dig it up and I'll make sure you get it. Maybe Bill has one, maybe I've got it right here, let me see. When they gave me the Commando Hall of

Honor, I had this made up to give to- This if for you. This is for you. That's given to men...
This is really great. Challenge coins. (Pause) This is great. That's yours. Thank you, sir.

Howe: Thank you.

Capers: Stand up and stretch my legs for a while.

Howe: Yeah. Let me get you unhooked.

Capers: I hope we did okay.