Doctor Wallace Alcorn

March 28th, 2017
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Webb: My name is Thomas Webb and on behalf of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library I'm here with Doctor Wallace Alcorn. Today is March 28th, 2017, and we're going to talk about your military service. In my opinion, you have the, sort of, the epitome of the story that people are often reluctant to talk about because they think that we want these combat style stories, but that's not necessarily the case. We're looking for all kinds of areas about military life, and you certainly have covered quite a bit of group in your forty-three years of service. We typically start this interviews just asking you when and where you were born.

Alcorn: All right, I was born in 1930 in Milwaukee, [Wisconsin].

Webb: And what was life like growing up in Milwaukee in the 30s?

Alcorn: It was the Depression, but I didn't know that 'til I studied history years later. We had a very happy, wholesome, family. My parents skimped on things, scarified, but I didn't know that it was. We thought that everybody lived that way. You know, we had either, jelly on bread, or peanut butter on bread. And we celebrated weekends on Sunday by having both peanut butter and jelly.

Webb: What was school like for you?

Alcorn: I didn't start out very well. First grade--kindergarten was fine; we had Miss. Robbin Tomlin. [They] were my teachers. I remember them. First grade, I remember that teacher but I won't mention her name, she didn't like boys, or at least she didn't like the way boys acted. Or she didn't like the way first grade boys acted, and we didn't get along very well and that put me behind things. And then I suffered the whole range of childhood illnesses, for most of which I was quarantined. So I lost a total of three semesters during grade school because of illness. So by the time I finished eighth grade, finished that K-8 school, I was

three semesters behind, which I made up, two of which I made up during high school, I went through high school in three years instead of four.

Webb: Yeah, it doesn't take too much at that age to really get behind. Okay, well, in some of the paper work that you've supplied to us you did talk about some of your family, and their military experiences and one of the questions that we always ask is just whether there is a history of military service in your family, so why don't you go ahead and talk about that a little bit?

Alcorn: Mine was not a military family; it wasn't consistently so. The earliest of which I am aware was on my mother's side, back more generations than I'll take time to count, but he was a surgeon in the continental Army, Dr. [George] Mosse. My great-great grandfather was Chaplain of the 2nd Wisconsin Volunteer Cavalry Regiment during the Civil War. He was succeeded in that role by one of his sons, my great grandfather. The father and two sons were in that same regiment. My great grandfather was a first lieutenant for one of the companies. My father was in World War I at the very end of it, never got overseas to France. My brother was in the [Unites States] Navy, and one of my sons was a Regular Army officer.

Webb: Yeah, we'll talk about that, too. So how did you get interested in the military?

Alcorn: I grew up during World War II, and during that time, everything was oriented on the war. Those who served on active duty were heroes, at least in our way of thinking. Everybody deferred to them; everybody appreciated it. In fact, those who did not go on active duty, either drafted or enlisted, had a hard time; they really had to sell themselves. I can remember many old women looking up and saying, "Young man, why are you not in the service?" You know that sort of thing. So, I never was gung-ho for war as such. I didn't understand what war was, but I certainly wanted to be admired the way they did, these people in uniform. I looked up to them and very sincerely respected them. And so wanted to get in on this, and when I was sixteen, on my sixteenth birthday, I tried to enlist in the Navy. Earlier, that probably would have worked; they would have accepted my lie and looked the other way, but they were--the fighting was over, just over, and they were scaling down, and they weren't that desperate for new enlistees. So they sent me away with some affection, and so I went back at my seventeenth birthday, and at 0730 hours I was at the naval recruiting office to be enlisted and was sworn in then.

Webb: You said, elsewhere that your father wouldn't fib for you, to say that you were older, and then, even at seventeen. Given that he had served in the military, did he give you any kind of advice or word of warning or anything that might have slowed down your momentum and your eagerness to enter?

Alcorn: No, I think he understood that…mother would have protested, and I would guess she did, to him, but he took care of her. By that time, he gave me a good deal of autonomy. He was always there. He would call me up short if I was doing something wrong, but I think what he said when I asked was…I tried the old lie that had worked during WWII, "We lost my birth certificate." And [the Navy recruiter] said, "Well then your father has to sign an affidavit," and when I asked my father to do that he said something like, "You're too old for me to tell you what to do, but I'm too old to lie for you and you're on your own." And I admired him for that. I was disappointed in that it didn't work, and yet, I admired his integrity and I gladly accepted that.

Webb: So why the Navy?

Alcorn: Because Milwaukee, Great Lakes... Milwaukee, on weekends, was flooded with Great Lakes people. After a weekend or two in Chicago, they preferred Milwaukee. Milwaukee was smaller at that time, it was still kind of an old town, I mean, a small town sort of thing. I think they felt safer. Now they had a stereotype about Chicago, everybody has a stereotype about Chicago, there's some basis for it, but no stereotype ever works very fully. I'm very comfortable on Chicago and I've always been, but I think there's something attractive about Milwaukee to them. Certainly, we treated the... Fort McCoy sent soldiers in, Fort Sheridan sent soldiers in, but it was largely, either Glenview or Great Lakes, so Milwaukee was flooded with soldiers. I meet them at... it was sailors. I met them at our church, where they were very welcome, and so, I just seemed to be oriented on that. I was a sea scout so I had that background as well.

Webb: Could you explain what that is?

Alcorn: Well, the Sea Scouts is one of the branches of the Senior Scout branches of the Boy Scouts. And I went all through Boy Scouts; I was an Eagle Scout with the palms and I joined the Sea Scouts as well to supplement that. I like sailing. I worked on a fishing boat on Lake Michigan. I liked sailing; I like to be on the water.

Webb: So, how long after that 0730 meeting at the reserve office, how long before you then went to boot camp?

Alcorn: It's a little fuzzy. I don't have records of the time there, the records that I had are now archived in Wake Forest, North Carolina, but I was in high school, and the Naval Reserve program was not very well organized at that time. And it wasn't very well run. It was mostly World War II veterans who liked the Navy but also like being out of the Navy, and they like to play sailors on weekends and that sort of thing. And so they had a lot of fun. We had a patrol, PC, a patrol craft moored at our reserve center on Water Street in Milwaukee; it was in the Milwaukee River. And on weekends we would sail on that, almost every weekend. I went out as much as I could. And so, somewhere along the line, they decided that we really ought to go to boot camp. So they created an ad hoc kind of program of boot camp for reservists, and I dropped out of high school to join that, and we went to Great Lakes. It too was not very well run. We didn't learn what we should learn. It was more a matter of meeting the requirements of having something.

Webb: So what kind of thing were you learning as opposed to the kind of things you thought you should be learning?

Alcorn: Well, when I went through Army Basic Training later, I got a better idea of what should have been done. We weren't really prepared to function in the fleet. It wasn't complete on that. It was kind of half-hearted. Our petty officers were divided. Some of them were trying... they'd done their service and they were trying to get out and they weren't that much interested in us, and every now and then somebody would come down and disciple them and wanted to get things squared away. It wasn't really a complete basic training boot camp, but it went on the records as that. I was on active duty but at that point they were really trying to get rid of people, trying to reduce the force, and so they made it easy to get out, and they offered the deal that, "We'll let you go back and finish high school as long as that's what you want. We'd like you to be a high school graduate but you'd have to stay in the Naval Reserve and go to drills and continue your training there." And so then I went back to high school and finished that.

Webb: Just kind of comparing a naval boot camp to an Army boot camp, are you doing the same kind of running and that kind of activity or is it more classroom oriented?

Alcorn: The biggest difference was not in the training, that the Army gave it at Fort Riley, Kansas, as over against boot camp at Great Lakes, Illinois, but in my attitude, by that time I was a college graduate, I had been through boot camp, I had five years of Naval Reserve experience, some of it on active duty, most in the reserve, and I knew what they were trying to do. The biggest thing is I had learned was that a strong motivation of all basic training, and I would guess that the Marine Corps, and the Air Force was similar, and in more recent years I've observed training there too, fear was a lot of it in buffaloing the people. For instance, when we went on guard duty in basic training they said, "Now, what we're going to do, we have some outlying warehouses that have been, uh, burglarized recently, and we have to watch that, and so those who are on that post are going to be armed. You're going to get live ammunition." And I thought, "Yeah, sure, you're going to give live ammunition to those that are, don't really know how to fire these weapons." I knew that they were just trying to scare us, and I wouldn't be scared. So it was a more thorough, a more thought of basic training but it had been...in later years when I served in training units and would compare the training that they were giving later to basic trainees was so much better, so much more professional, so much more thought-through than it had been when I was in basic training. I have very great admiration for who are training our basic soldiers now.

Webb: At what point uh did they sort of, start to assign you specific duties in the navy reserve?

Alcorn: It was on the weekend when we went out on our PC [patrol craft], which is the smallest vessel in the Navy called a ship, a patrol craft. It was used... it was... its nickname was a “Sub Chaser.” It was smaller than a DE [destroyer escort]. Every now and then a destroyer escort would come in; we'd sail on that as well. So really we were preforming duties before we were trained for it. I started out as a cook’s helper, and the biggest thing that I learned in that was not how to cook, but he taught me more about being a sailor than I had learned in boot camp because he really cared about us. He taught us how to wash our clothes at sea, how to roll them, how to conduct ourselves on ship and so forth. Then later, I became a striker for quartermaster signalman and there again the petty officers

were so good at training us, and, uh, it was on the job training. I learned more on those weekends and the weeks on active duty then I had in the formal training that they gave.

Webb: Can you talk a little bit about the type of signaling you were trained in, just describe that?

Alcorn: Well, I had an advantage, and I think this is somehow how they let me doing things that they wouldn't have done otherwise. Through my Boy Scout experience, I already knew Morse code, and I knew semaphore, you know, and that was one of the signals from the bridge that we did using the semaphore flags. What I didn't know is hoisting the coded flags, but then the first class signalman, taught us how to do that but we caught on. There was another fellow there with me, he had a similar background, and we really caught on quickly and, well, and I remember one time, when one of the other ships signaled over asking, the captain was asking, "How many signal men do you have aboard?" and he replied, "One, the rest are reservist," and he was admiring how quickly we were responded to his signals and so forth. And those petty officers really did an excellent job of training us.

Webb: You talked about the Sea Scout experience, and this other gentleman had this similar experience. You had a lot of time on the water. What was kind of the makeup of your reserve group? Was it all Milwaukee area boys? Did they all have similar experiences being on the water? Do you remember?

Alcorn: I think my unit was organized Service Division 9— maybe 217. While I was in college, I know that it was Organized Reservist Division 9-1 because it was in the Naval Reserve Center in Aurora, [Illinois], and it was Aurora starting with A, and was in the same state as the 9th Naval District and Great Lakes had that number there. I remember less about that unit there then I did about when we were on the water on the ship. And during that time as well, we had two weeks on the USS Rochester, a heavy cruiser, and we went up the Atlantic Coast, and paid a courtesy visit to some of the sea ports in Nova Scotia, Canada, that during World War II had been protected by the American Navy that drove the German submarines out so that their fishing boats could get out again.

Webb: So you were in Philadelphia, [Pennsylvania], for that two weeks?

Alcorn: We went off in the Philadelphia Navy Yard.

Webb: And then you moved into the Aurora…?

Alcorn: When I was in college. Yes, I took the CA & E [Chicago, Aurora, and Elgin] from Wheaton, [Illinois], out to Aurora and became a personnel-man in that unit there.

Webb: Okay. So, we're talking about five years of service in the Navy. Did it sort of, get to the heart of what you hoped it would when you first signed up when you had that eagerness? Did you feel like you accomplished that goal?

Alcorn: No. I'm grateful for what I learned, but the Navy didn't do for me nearly what it should have done, but I was no worse off than anybody else. I would guess if I were in the Army Reserve or in the National Guard during that same time, it would be similar to that. It took a while for the reserve forces of the armed forces to recover from World War II; get their feet on the ground, get organized, and, and--come to recognize that they were dealing with civilian soldiers, not active duty people. Later, when I was in the Army Reserve, they had their act together. And during the Korean period, we began to experience some disillusionment. It was a totally different from the feeling of during World War II, but I didn't really sense this too much until I was effectively drafted and got on active duty and in basic training.

Webb: Couple things about your time in the Navy. You were awarded some citations?

Alcorn: I received the Navy Commendation medal, and this was largely because of the personnel work that we did. I went to personnel school at Great Lakes and was skilled in particularly classification of personnel.

Webb: Okay. Was there another that because you were in during the same period as the World War II service members, did you some kind of acknowledgement of that?

Alcorn: Well, they gave me the Navy Good Conduct Medal which is I think was just routine. I have often heard that referred to as, “Four years of undetected crime,” or something of that sort. You kept your nose clean and so forth. I think there had been times when both the Army and the Navy Good Conduct medal have

been given more seriously than that, but the one recognition that I really felt unworthy of for was the World War II Victory Medal, and when we came to 31 December, 1947, was the, there were two or three close-offs of the World War II period. One was 31 December, 1946, and the final one was exactly a year later, and I was in boot camp at that time. One of the things I remember is we didn't need to put stamps on our mail to that point, but on 1 January, we had to put stamps on our mail because we were beyond World War II, what they called the duration period, and so, apparently, everybody on active duty at that time was given the World War II medal. There was no ceremony, it was just handed to us in a box, and it really ticked off some of the petty officers who had served well during World War II and really earned it. And we did not earn it, and they knew we didn't, but, we, I recognized that even then.

Webb: Okay, I was going to ask if you recognized it even then. Did they give commentary as they were kind of handing this out?

Alcorn: No, it was very routine. They probably got a big box of them and said "Hand them out," and that's what they did.

Webb: During this time, you talked about knowing sort of these older boys that were going off to World War II and that being kind of a catalyst for you wanting to enter the military, but during this kind of later period, when some of those same boys are coming back, did you encounter them? Did they have the same attitude after having experiencing combat?

Alcorn: As far as I recall, as far as I knew at the time, every one of them was grateful for their service, and they were very open in telling me what they learned in the service. Most of them I knew from my church in Milwaukee. Some of them became leaders in my Boy Scout troop; they became assistant scoutmasters, and that sort of thing, and particularly on camping trips, canoe trips, when there was time to just reflect they did that. I don't know that any of them really had terrible combat experience; several of them were in combat, except for the one that didn't come back and that was Lt. Jack Cook. Jack was one of my heroes... My father was the scoutmaster when I became a scout, and Jack was one of his scouts and was my babysitter. When my parents needed somebody to sit with us, they had Jack, as one of his scouts, come in and do that, and Jack was my hero. He came from a poor family, really lived in a tenement. I don't know what his educational experience was. He probably graduated from high school, but no

more than that. Didn't have... didn't go into the Army with very much, but he tried for Flight School, was qualified and became a bomber pilot, and I remember the one leave that he came as a 2nd lieutenant wearing his wings, how proud I was of him. And his first assignment was flying the hump, flying from China-Burma theater over the Himalayan Mountains to resupply our forces trapped in China, and he never made it back. We never found out what had happened to him. Obviously, he crashed somewhere in the Himalayas. As far as I know, his body was never recovered. There were a lot like that…and that was a heavy experience for me.

Webb: That was a pretty risky flight path for a lot of different reasons.

Alcorn: I remember. At that time during World War II, they put flags… families would put flags in their windows. A blue star was for each family member in the service. A silver star was if that person was overseas, and a gold star was if they were killed, and I remember the first time I saw a gold star in a window. I stood on the street, I don't know how old I was, early teenager, and I cried…

Webb: It becomes real, even at that early of an age. So, let's talk about how you went from the Navy into the Army because it seems like a very, I'm not going to say unusual, but uncommon.

Alcorn: It was. It was convoluted, maybe is the word.

Webb: Yup, that's a good word for it.

Alcorn: Because I, although I had not completed my hitch...My enlistment in the naval reserve was four years, but when the Korean War started, and that would have been up in '51, but automatically by law, we were extended by one year, which was mandatory. It really didn't make any difference for me because I was in college and I continued going to the reserve unit in Aurora, and so forth, but when I finished college, I had lost steam academically to go on. Also I had started at mid-year, and so when I got to the point where most of the class graduated, who had started six months earlier, I was still short one hour of Greek that was required, and I couldn't graduate at that time, so that...I didn't know what to do, and I thought I'd work for a year; get some money to finish college and go on to seminary, which was my plan, graduate school, and I went into the draft board and tried to explain this to them very openly, "I have a 4-D classification, divinity

student. This is a deferment; it's an indefinite deferment, for all practical purposes, I'm still a divinity student, I'm just taking kind of a leave for a year, and then I'll go on to seminary. So, I'd appreciate it if you'd understand that and maintain this deferment." They said, "We understand, but we are going to be issuing you a draft. You're a 1-A," or whatever that was. And then I said, "Well, okay, that's what I was afraid of. When are you going to send me the notice that I have to go on active duty as a draftee?" "Well, when we get around to it." "When would that be?" "Well, I suppose that would be about six months from now?" And I thought, six months from now I'm going to be back in the middle of an academic year. I had enough trouble starting college in the middle of an academic year. So when two years later, when they released me from my drafted status, I'm, again I have to go to grad school in the middle of the year now that's not going to work. Two years if I'm drafted. "Can I enlist for two years?" And they said, "Well, the only way you can do that is to enlist for a civilian commitment for OCS, Officer Candidate School, and then you serve for two years and you go to OCS and be commissioned." That wasn't explained thoroughly to me, and also, as I look back, I think I was naive and probably some wishful thinking so I exploited what the recruiter said into something that was really not true. So I'm not blaming him. Ironically, later as an enlisted man, I taught in the Army-Air Force Recruiting School. Not recruiting, but I taught sales psychology and public speaking, but I got to know the regular instructors, and they said, “Yeah, you were handed a bill of goods, they purposefully misled you, they shouldn't have, but that’s what happened.” And so when I... so I took this civilian commitment for two years of active duty, which was the equivalent of two years, but then when I got on active duty, I realized several other things. Talking to our NCO's in basic training who had been in Korea and learned from them by that time, they were playing games over there. They weren't trying to win a war anymore as we did all through World War II. They were disillusioned, and we learned that disillusion meant from them, and I thought, "This is not what I think military service is, and I don't want this." And I had to get out of... And then I also learned, I was talking to some of the others… they were these guys that were cadre personnel, they wore blue helmet liners. And they had arm bands with [the chevrons of] corporal and sergeant on it, and I knew something was wrong there. And so I asked and they said, "Well, we're privates as you are. We just finished basic training, but we're going to go to OCS, but they have more people than they can get than they have openings. So, we're just having practical experience in working with basic trainees while we're waiting for OCS." And I said, "How long have you been doing this?" And they say, "Well, for several

weeks, several months," whatever. And I could tell what was happening, is, people with commitments with OCS were not getting to OCS, and also I learned what that two years meant. The clock started ticking upon commission. And so, sixteen weeks of basic training, whatever time that we had to spend in this leadership school that they call, that nobody told me about, probably the recruiters probably didn't even know about that, plus three months of OCS, and then the two years starts. I said, "No. No. I need to get out of this." So then I asked if I could get of it, and they said, "Well, the only way to get [out] of this, you have to appear before a board of officers and convince them that you should be released from your obligation so that they're released from their obligation to you. But you'd have to serve out your two years." And I thought, "Well, it's the equivalent of being drafted. That was what was going to have to happen anyway, but I'm six months ahead and I'm going to get out before an academic year starts." So I went before the board of officers, and there were about twelve of us in there from all over, all trying to get out for pretty much the same reason; that what the Army said was going to happen was not going to happen and we could tell that. So I let others go first and I questioned them as to what they were asked, and none of them received a waiver from that commitment. The Army was relieved from sending us to OCS, but we were relieved from having to go and so forth. So they were all being turned down and so when I went in, there was a captain who was the president of the board, the rest were lieutenants, and none of them probably very well experienced, so I gave, I handed them a line. I really said that I didn't think I'd be worthy of being an officer, uh, I was respecting the officer, "I don't think I could measure up to what you men are. I don’t think I'd make a very good officer." And they said, "Well, very well, Private, we understand that." And they gave me a waiver. So I got out of that commitment to OCS. And then at this time I had learned too that I was committed for Military Police OCS at Fort Gordon, Georgia, and that school had closed entirely and I was going to go, if I ever got to OCS, I'd have to go to infantry OCS, not MP [Military Police] at all, which is what my motivation was. But later, years later, one of the many ironies of my military service, I became an MP Officer…the easy way.

Webb: There's an easy way?

Alcorn: Yes, with a direct commission in another area.

Webb: I'd like to back up for just a minute because of something that you said and because of a thread that runs through your military career and your personal life and that is you went to Wheaton College [in Wheaton, Illinois,] with a philosophy background [major]. You had the goal of seminary, of becoming a, I don't even know what the right words are, a religious...

Alcorn: A pastor.

Webb: A pastor. So, when did that... I noticed that you also had that in your family background; there were others that served as chaplain in the military. When did you kind of know when that was your calling?

Alcorn: The chaplaincy or ministry?

Webb: The ministry?

Alcorn: Well, I think I began think of the pastorate when I was in graduate school because of my respect for my pastor and how much my pastor meant to my family, and so, he was helping people, he meant much to people, and that motivated me. I didn't know that my great-great grandfather had been a chaplain 'til years later, until I began to research that background. And I didn't think of the chaplaincy when I was thinking of the pastorate. It was while on active duty in the Navy. I had no contact with a good Navy chaplain, there certainly were. The chaplains that I... I was actually, for the two weeks I was on the Rochester, I was a chaplain's yeoman, and I was a chaplain's yeoman simply because I was assigned to the deck crew and the chief-boatswain [mate] wasn't comfortable with me. He thought I was too refined or something of that sort, and so he sent me away to the chaplain to get rid of me, and I just worked in the ship's library, and that chaplain was not one I could respect at all. And that didn't turn me off about the chaplaincy, but it didn't attract me. However, when I was in basic training, I did meet a chaplain who I admired and respected, and I wasn't thinking of the chaplaincy then, but that was in my mind. And I thought, "I could combine military service, which I came to like, with the ministry, which I also like and combine the two."

Webb: Let's see, where are we at? Another question that I had, you talked a little bit about this…disintegration of feelings about the Korean War that was being taught to you; that you were learning about from people that you were being

trained by, do you understand or can you explain to the public kind of why. You said that they were playing games in Korea at that point, but can you go into a little bit more detail about what it was like to serve in the military during the Korean War?

Alcorn: It was even more traumatic during the Vietnam period. I have experienced, not just seen, but experienced such changes in both civilian attitude toward the military, and the military's internal attitude toward itself. During World War II, it was very patriotic, it was gung-ho. The armed forces could do no wrong as it were; you knew that they did, but when they did not do so well, it was an accident, it couldn't have been helped. You forgave all of that and so forth because you were off to win the war. And, as soon as the war was over, you were going to quit. Uh, there were a lot of things that happened during WWII that we all now wished had not happened. I think of two things in particular. I think of the internment of the Nisei's, the Japanese nationals who were citizens, American citizens. I got to know many of them because there were in our church... Milwaukee suddenly got a number in who had left the West Coast. If they stayed in the West Coast, they were going to get interned, but if they were willing to go to the Midwest, then they could, if they could find work, they could do it. And in our Church, we had a number of them and I came to one, admire then, and I came to respect them, as well. And at that time, I didn't realize how unjustly they were being treated. The other is the dropping of the atomic bombs. When they were dropped, when both of them were dropped, both, on Hiroshima, and Nagasaki, I was at Boy Scout camp, isolated from the civilian community. I didn't hear the news reports, and when they told us about this at Boy Scout camp, I thought it was another one of the tricks that they kept pulling on us. I didn't believe them. It was totally unbelievable, inconceivable to me that you could wipe out a city by dropping one bomb because I had seen newsreel pictures of thousands of bombs being dropped to obliterate some neighborhoods. My wife's home, what later became my wife, home where she was born in Manchester, England, was totally bombed out. So I couldn’t believe this. When we went home, first question I asked my father was to explode that myth. I wanted him to reassure me that it was another trick that they never got around to straightening up. So, the internment of the Japanese Nationals, the dropping of the A-bombs were terrible. Both of those were terrible things, but I also remember how single-minded, how obsessed we were at winning that war at any cost, and one of the costs was to intern people that later we learned did not need to be interned, but then we didn't know it, and we couldn't take that

chance. And I am now sympathetic to the government that did that, as well as, sympathetic to those who were interned. And the dropping of the bomb and studying history later, I came to realize that it would have been a terrible disaster if we had needed to invade Japan. I have come to know, closely, very well, people who were staged in the Pacific ready to go in. I have come to know people who were in Nagasaki at the time. They were children at the time, and they survived only because, I'm thinking of one man, his mother put him in the bathtub and loaded mattresses on top of him and he survived. So, those were terrible things, but they were necessary, and in Korea, we weren't trying to win that war. Now, I don't blame the military. The military's job is to do what the civilian politician officials tell them to do, and they did what those military officials told them to do. They were to proceed to a certain point but stop before China became even more involved in that war; to do no more than that. But the military is not trained to do things like that. The military is trained to win a war, and I have used this analogy. During the Vietnam War, I was on ABC television in a debate about the My Lai incident, and while in this debate, an analogy came to my mind. Then, many years later--I didn't understand it while I was in basic training--the military is like an attack dog, a German Shepard, for instance. They're smart dogs. They learn well, they learn to obey perfectly, and you train them to attack, in case the time comes when they need to attack somebody to protect you, but you put a chain on that person, on that dog, and you hold it on the chain. You keep the chain on, even when the dog is jumping towards what appears to be a threat, but the chain is there, and you only release it when it's really necessary to attack. The military is the attack dog, and the civilian officials -- the president, the Congress--are the people who put that chain on. They decide when that chain is released and you attack. So, during war, during Korea, the armed forces were trying to attack but they weren't allowed to attack. I don't…I don't second-guess the civilian officials, but it was a terrible situation to be trained to want to attack, but you're not allowed to attack, and you have divided feelings between knowing how to attack when it's necessary, and therefore wanting to attack, and yet, inside, you really don't want to kill anybody. You don't want to be violent. And then, during Vietnam, it was even worse. During the Korean period, we were ignored, but nobody criticized us for being in the military. It was a very common experience to serve two years as a draftee, to return home, and then somebody in the neighborhood, or at church, or at a club, says to you, "Oh, I haven't seen you for a while, where have you been?" "Well, I spent two years in the Army. I was over in Korea. I was in combat." "Oh, that's where you were. Oh, all right." But during Vietnam, we

didn't dare wear our uniforms in the civilian community unless we had to because we were yelled at, we were spit upon, literally. And in Korea we were ignored, Vietnam, we were attacked. And then, Desert Shield, Desert Storm, became such a refreshing change to all of that. It was somewhat back to the World War II kind of days, but since then, we have become disillusioned, once again.

Webb: Well, I'm sure that we'll talk about some of those issues more as we move through your military career. I want to take us back [chuckling], to The Adjutant General School at Fort Benjamin Harrison. What kinds of things were you doing there?

Alcorn: Well, when I received the waiver from OCS, I was in a sixteen-week infantry company, 87th Infantry Regiment of the 10th Infantry Division at Fort Riley, that was training riflemen, that's what we would have been, and you were trained as a rifleman so that you would then go to officer training. Not going to OCS, they put me in the 85th Regiment, which was for, most of those people were going to a common specialist school, and I was put in that not knowing where I would go, nor did they. But while I was in that, I was on the regimental football team, which was itself a fake. It was a way to get out of unnecessary training because I'd learned that if you were on the football team, when you went out on the range, you were put in the first order of firing so that you would be through with the requirement and be released to go to football practice. But then, football practice wasn't till the afternoon, and so, there is nothing to do for the rest of the time and you just made work, carried things around, bring water, or whatever it was. They were... it was... during the Vietnam period, I mean the Korean period, draftees, and I was, in my way of thinking, a draftee, we would...we were not...they distinguished between a goof-up and a goof-off. We were goof-offs but we weren't goof-ups, and this is especially at The Adjutant General School [i.e. Chaplain school]. We were all college graduates, and we would never goof anything up, but we were very good at goofing off; just doing what was necessary and no more than that because that was all that they were…it was just marking time, that sort of thing. Okay, I don't want to get too far off course here. Okay, because I was on the football team, somewhere along the line, they didn't know what to do with us, so they let us go early, and as long as we reported for football practice on time. I didn't know how to play football, but I knew how to play this game, and again, this is part of having been experienced, having gone through basic training once, I knew what they were

after and I knew how to play that game and so I did it. Usually, I didn't... I never hurt the Army. I did benefit myself, and I think I got everything out of basic training that could be got. There's a rule of management that in the first 20% of an experience, you learn 80% of what it is you need to learn. So, if you go through 20% of basic training, you've learned at least 80% of what you should learn. I didn't know that then, but I sensed what it was. Basic training was geared to the slowest learner that was in the company. For the quick learners, most of it was a waste of time. We learned very quickly, and thereafter was just going through the same thing over and over again. So, we learned, I think I had everything out of basic training that I should, but in that extra time, I stopped by what was called C & A, Classification and Assignment, and I walked in on my own, which I shouldn't have, you only should be there if your company sent you there. I looked around for a low ranking NCO. Enough rank he could do something but not so high-ranking he had a lot of responsibility and could get in trouble. See, I knew this much as well. And so I notice a DOT on his desk, which is *Dictionary of Occupational Titles*. It's a publication of the Labor Department, probably doesn't even exist anymore because there are so many more jobs, and I was an expert at that. I spent a lot of time at Great Lakes training, learning how to do that. And I said, “How you doing with the DOT?" He said, "Oh you know what the DOT is?" And I said, "Yeah," and I picked it up and showed him I knew how to use it. He said, "Man, we need you." And "How do you know this?" And I explain my training as a personnelman, and I said, "I'd like to do that in the Army," and he said "You know, we should have you do you do that." Now that’s all I knew, and then I left and I had to get to football practice, but when I finished that eight weeks of basic training, I found that I was assigned to the clerk-typist school in the 35th Field Artillery Battalion, which was no more artillery than the regiment was infantry that it just held a kind of window dressing. So I went through clerk-typist school to become a company clerk, and here again I was ahead of the learning curve. I think, as I recall, a lot of the time was spent to learn how to type, but I had learned how to type in freshman year of high school, and I think the requirement to qualify as a clerk-typist, you had to type twenty-six words a minute, and I was already typing something like eighty words a minute. So there was no reason for me to go to typing school, so they released us to go to one of the other schools there, like wheeled-vehicle mechanics school to type up their lesson plans and that sort of thing. So once again, we had a lot of fun, and so forth. Then at the end of that, it must be that the contact that I made at the C & A office came in because they sent me to The Adjutant General School at Fort Benjamin Harrison in Indiana along with a couple of others from our

company. Some of them went to stenographer school. A couple of us went to the Personnel Management Specialist course, and an eight-week course, learning to do in the Army similar to what I had already learned and do in the Navy, but a more thorough training. I did very well on that. I was top graduate, and so I was held over. Instead of being assigned out to a unit; in clerk-typist school we might have gone to an infantry, Rifle Company. As a personnel management specialist, the lowest we would have gone would have been regiment, more likely it would have been division or above, to work on an assignment of personnel. And that's what they should have done. We were taught to assign people according to the Army's needs. Take the civilian experience and put them where they should be used, for the Army's benefit. We were to... in basic training we were taught, in some supply discipline course, "The right tool for the right job," but we were always using the wrong tool for the wrong job and that sort of thing, and there in The Adjutant General School, where the theory of personnel management was taught, they were violating the theory of personnel management. My friends, who had gone to stenography school, who then should have been assigned to a general officer to take dictation, were being kept at The Adjutant General School as clerks, not stenographers, and I was held up, and they didn't know what I was going to do, but I was top graduate, I was a college graduate, so they wanted to use me somewhere. Well, I really didn't have much of a job, but I created the job for myself, and I got talking with the instructors, most of whom were field grade officers--majors, lieutenants-colonels--the lowest were captains, hardly any lieutenants, and then there were some master sergeants doing something on that as well, and I thought that I could teach as well as they did. So, I went into the colonel, who was the head of the personal management department. I had done the job they gave me very well, organizing, handing out supplies and that sort of thing. And I talked him into letting me be an instructor. The classes that they then assigned to me had been previously taught by a lieutenant-colonel, or a major. So as a private, I was teaching the course, now it really didn't take a lieutenant-colonel or a major to teach these courses, obviously, because I learned it well enough to teach it myself. And I did very well in those courses, in teaching that. So here I was as a private, in an officer's job, and I was teaching in the personnel management course. I taught, "Principles of Personnel Management," "Methods of Interview," "Organization of the Army," "Personnel Psychology," and then that was used. I also taught in the Army-Air Force Recruiting School that was part then of The Adjutant School, I taught "Sale Psychology" and "Public Speaking." I taught in the predecessor to the Sergeants

Major's Academy where, as a private, or a corporal later and so forth, I was teaching first sergeants and sergeants-major, E-7's. The subject that I knew that they needed to learn but they didn't know, and I did very well with them. So much so, that the head...the colonel who was head of that department personnel administration division, asked my boss if he could interview me and his question was, "How do you, as a private, get along so well with these E-7's?" And the answer was, "I respected them for what they could do, and they respected me for what I could do, and we respected each other, and they knew that." He had said, "You are rated higher than our field grade officers, who are teaching in those same courses."

Webb: Did you ever have any conflict with, you know, somebody saying, “I'm so above rank here, what do I need to listen to you for?”

Alcorn: No, never, they...I think my attitude toward them was what it should be, and so their attitude toward me was what it should be. Even when I was teaching people of equal rank, I didn't act as if I out-ranked them because I was the instructor, and there was sort of an aura that we created for that. For instance, as I was promoted to private first class, I didn't sew the chevron on my sleeve. As I was promoted to corporal, I didn’t sew the chevrons on my sleeve. I presented myself in terms of what I could do, whereas what my rank was. And on my desk, instead of having whatever my name was and whatever my rank was as everybody else, I had the sign made up so that there was no rank there, as if I were a civilian, or something of that sort, and they really treated me that way as well. I was in the same offices as lieutenant colonels and majors.

Webb: Did you get in trouble for not sewing the...?

Alcorn: No. No. Not only that, but we were wearing brown shoes at that time. '57 is when they went into black shoes. I also, instead of wearing khaki socks, I wore chocolate brown socks.

Webb: So, while you were teaching this course work, you had another job as well?

Alcorn: Yes.

Webb: And you can't tell us too much?

Alcorn: Yeah, because I had had experience while in college as a private investigator. That was even to the point of, the law firm to which I worked, for which I worked, contracted with the Milwaukee Police Department, to use me as an investigator on things that their detectives couldn't do for one reason or another. So I had investigation experience, particularly undercover experience.

Webb: And how did you get involved in that?

Alcorn: Because I needed summer work.

Webb: Sure.

Alcorn: And I applied as an investigator, and learned how to do that, and was taught on the job and became good at it. The Milwaukee detectives then were all promoted from being patrolmen because they did a good job as patrolmen, but they didn't know how to forget how to be a patrolman because while they wore civilian clothes, and were supposed to be not recognized, incognito. Their officer ship just showed right through it. And I could pick out a detective even though he was in plain clothes, and I couldn't even quite explain why I recognized him except for one time, one asked me. When I was selling door-to-door as I was out in the street, and this detective was quizzing me about something, what I had seen in the neighborhood, and I addressed him as officer, and he said, "How do you know I'm a policeman?" And I said, "Well, who is going to wear a suit coat on a hot day like this unless you're told to wear a suit coat, and so forth." And so with that experience, I was tapped to do some work for the counter-intelligence people, and was later acting in reserve, I was in a counter-intelligence detachment, and actually retrained, but I was doing the job before I was trained for the job. I think the only thing that I should say and in all honesty, I'm not trying to be secretive or something of that sort. What I did was really not very significant, but it had to be done so that the Army could find that it wasn't significant. There was something the Army needed to know…that might be going on. It needed to know whether it was going on or not. What I delivered for the counter-intelligence people, was that it was not going on, and they found the answer to their question. And so; it could only be done in a different role, so that's what we did. But later, then I became involved in counter-intelligence and trained in that very well.

Webb: So, this is a period of your military career where you moved up in rank; from a private to...?

Alcorn: Well, an E-4, and I should have been promoted to E-6 [i.e., E-5], what was then called sergeant, but there was a battle going between people and I crossed the wrong person, and they meant to discipline me by denying me promotion to E-5 for one month, but the trouble is, they didn't pay attention, and I was at the end of my enlistment and so, I never got to be an E-5, and another one of the ironies are, I eventually made it to colonel, but I couldn't make it to sergeant. And in some ways I resent that to this day.

Webb: That makes sense:

Alcorn: Because being a sergeant was no big deal, really. I was doing an officer's job already, but it was still something I deserved but didn't get and I resented that.

Webb: So, your two years of service is up. What was your thought process at that point, especially about the military and wanting to continue on as opposed to not? We talked about the difference between the community's response during World War II, Korean War, we're about to get into an even different look from the community's perspective about the military, so kind of what was your, mindset at this point?

Alcorn: Recently, I talked to a community board, and I told them outright, that people say to me, "Thank you for your service." I say to them, "All right, thank you." I appreciate that, but I really feel that I need to thank the whole United States government for letting me serve because, honestly, I'm not trying to be humble at all, I really feel that I got more out of my military service than I ever put into it. And maybe I'm just more grateful. The Army, in every way, has said, thank you and we reward you and all that sort of thing, but I am more impressed with what I learned in the military. And it wasn't always what they meant to teach me, but it's what I learned. And so, in that two years of teaching at The Adjutant General School, where I was working with field grade officers all the time, and my job was to get to know the Army well, I think I came to understand the Army as well as know it. And a very simple lesson that I learned. People who were drafted at the same time I was effectively drafted would say, "The biggest thing I learned in the Army is never volunteer for anything." I'd say, "Yes, as a draftee that's what you learn, that's all you learned." And learning that, and as long as you stayed on

that level, that may not have been the best, but at least it was safe. What I learned is, yes, never volunteer for anything that they ask for volunteers for. But volunteer for things that they don't ask for volunteers, ask, volunteer for the things that you've learned, that you want to do; whether they know that you want to do it or not. And whether they think that it should be done. I can think of several instances where I volunteered for something that they weren't asking for volunteers. I created a job that didn't exist. One illustration: At one point when I was in the 85th Division Training, a reserve unit in Chicago, we were in the 2nd Brigade and the Army created a unit called an MTC, a Maneuver Training Command, and several of the training divisions had these created within it. Commanded by a colonel, it was on a brigade level, but it was very heavy, all field grade officers, all senior NCO's. They knew what the unit was to do. The unit was to exercise other units in how well they did their job by sending them through training exercises, but there was a, not an MTC chaplain, it wasn't a pastoral chaplain position, it is was lieutenant colonel position, I was a major, a lieutenant-colonel position, it was simply "Chief, Chaplain Division." My…the MTC commander, Col. Jim Bunting, who later became a major general and a division commander, was a commander of that. And I said, "Jim, what am I supposed to do?" And he said, "I don't know, Wally, you tell me what you're supposed to do." He said, "I think you're supposed to be just a regular chaplain." And I said, "That doesn't make sense. It doesn't meet branch requirements. You don't assign a chaplain for this few people. There is a ratio of chaplain to unit of people, like one low-grade chaplain to seven hundred or so, and that must mean something else." And he said, "Okay, find out what you're supposed to do and you tell me, let me know what you're supposed to do, but I just don't want your name associated with doing anything you shouldn't be doing." So I decided what made sense to me. That what a chaplain should be doing, and he should be exercising chaplains of these units that are being exercised and their commanders as to how chaplains are to be used and I had to tell him that. And I said, "Give me money so I can go to the 75th Maneuver Area Command. That's a two-star command that's doing what we on this lower level, so I can learn what I should do." So, when I went there I said to the O-6 colonel chaplain there, "What are you supposed to be doing as a chaplain?" He said, "I don't know. I just hold services. Nobody told me what to do." And I said, "Well, I think this is what you should do." He said, "Put that in writing." So I put it in writing and gave it to him. So then, Bunting and a bunch all of the O-6's went to a conference, so that every division chief explained to the MTC's what they should be doing on that lower level, and so that chaplain made a presentation as to what a chaplain should be

doing. So, Jim called me in, and individually, we were on that basis, “Wally” and “Jim.” We respected each other in that way. He said, "You know, it's a funny thing. This chaplain said exactly what you told me you thought you should be doing, but now I have the authority. Go ahead and do it." So, I literally created a job. Not only did I create a job for myself, but the report, the staff study that was under that man’s, under that colonel’s name, had become branch doctrine. And every now and then, for many years after that, somebody would contact me when they came into a maneuver or a logistic exercise and they would hand them... they would say, "You want to know what to do, read this," and then they would contact me and say, "We're still using that staff study report." There were other areas where that had happened as well. So, it was during that time where I knew the Army well enough. The point is, I knew how to pull ropes. I knew how to make the system work, and I learned how to work around the system when the system wasn't working.

Webb: Yeah, that seems like an incredibly important thing to learn, in such a large, kind of, machine, because so many people are not paying attention and just kind of going along with what they're told. So, after your two years of service, you decided to reenlist in the reserves?

Alcorn: No. Here, when I went, by law, when I finished that two-year requirement, I had finished. I had no more obligations, but the separation point at Fort Benjamin Harrison that was not part of The Adjutant General School, but The Adjutant General School was there, and I taught the very thing that they were supposed to be doing. I trained the people who worked in Separation Centers, so I knew what they should have been doing. They were in the habit of releasing draftees, and so they automatically transferred me to the Army Reserve. Then, draftees had…their serial number was preceded--and it was serial numbers then not social security number--serial number started with a “US,” mine had an "RA" for Regular Army. When they were released from active duty, their serial number changed to an “ER,” enlisted reserve. I should have been out entirely, but they changed mine. They took the “RA” off and put in “ER,” and I was in the reserve. Just as I was extended in the Naval Reserve without knowing; I was extended in the naval reserve. I was put into the “ER,” enlisted reserve, when I shouldn't have been. It was illegal. I could have fought that, but I thought, “Oh well, why argue with these guys? They don't know what they're doing; I'll figure this out later.” Then I thought, well, I may as well make some money from the enlisted reserve. So then I went to the 60th CIC [Counter Intelligence Corps] Detachment

in Milwaukee, and told them to look at my enlisted record and see if I was eligible to be a member of their unit, and they said, “Yes, you were.” They saw a record that I was never seen. What they showed me is, when they made an inquiry as to my background, it said, “See dossier number so and so, Fort Holabird, Maryland.” They had access to that. I did not, and I was never shown that. That was kept in my 201 file for many years, and it goofed things up because certain personnel people wanted to know what they needed to know in order to commission me and that sort of thing, but they couldn't find out. They were told, "Don’t worry about it, it’s creditable service." So, I was in this CIC unit and, but then I served in that for a while. Then, when I graduated from college, actually officially graduated, I was that one, I was treated as if I was a college graduate although technically I was not. But when I actually did graduate from college, and was also in graduate school, I learned that the Army had a brand new program called the Seminarian Program. You could be commissioned as a 2nd lieutenant [staff], you were really in effect were branch immaterial, but they didn’t know how to do that. So, there was a position called staff specialist that was sort of a dumping ground during World War II. Journalists were part of that, and it sounds kind of highfalutin but it wasn't. But they didn't know what to do, so anybody who was in the Seminarian Program was a 2nd lieutenant. You didn’t wear a cross because you weren’t a chaplain, but it was an open book with a sword across and encased within a wreath. So we were--so the theory was--we were to be apprentice chaplains. We were eligible to go to the basic chaplain course and complete it, and be as qualified as chaplains although we couldn’t be commissioned as a chaplain because we weren't seminary graduates yet. So, at the conclusion of my two-year graduate school, then I went to the chaplain officer basic course at Fort Slocum, New York, and went through the same thing. These people were already commissioned as 1st lieutenants, some of them were captains, one was a major because they had achieved that rank before. So, then I completed that, but there was nothing for me to do because the program was not developed well enough to let you serve as an apprentice chaplain, there's no way to do it. And when I asked about this they said, "We don't know. You’re an apprentice chaplain, but there's nothing for you to do. We can't assign you to a unit." So then I went to seminary. And I thought, well, I need to be active, I need to make some money, I’m in school and so forth. So, I went in, I walked into the Army Reserve training center in Chicago... in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where I was in seminary, and I said, "What vacancies do you have? I'm a 2nd lieutenant." "Well we need a platoon leader in the 70th MP Company." And I said, “Okay, I've had CI [counter-intelligence] experience. I've been an investigator, a private

investigator. Would you accept me as a platoon leader in the 70th MP Company?" And they asked the company commander "Yes." It was the 70th MP Company of the 70th Infantry Division. Its headquarters was in Detroit, at Fort Wayne, Detroit. It had a band, the division band, and the MP Company, were in Grand Rapids. So, I was accepted as a platoon leader in the 70th MP Company that was commanded by an engineer captain, who himself was not an MP Officer. And, so I started functioning in that. And they said, "Well, if you are going to continue in this job, you need to go to the officer basic course at Fort Gordon, Georgia, the Provost Marshal General School." I said, "Good, I need to do something this summer anyway when we don't have classes." So after my first year of seminary, graduate seminary, I went out on active duty, as a 2nd lieutenant MP. No, actually, I was a 2nd lieutenant staff, and I went to the Provost Marshal General School and the others were MP officers, and I went through the same course, and at the end of it I achieved my first officer MOS. Before I had only had a reporting code called 0001, now I received an MP Platoon Leader MOS. I don't remember what the number was, it's somewhere in the records, but now, I was an official MP. So, I took off the staff branch and put the crest of an MP officer, and I was a legitimate MP officer and I went back to the 70th MP Company, and functioned as the platoon leader in the MP.

Webb: So what was the role of the Military Police at that point?

Alcorn: Well, at that point, the division was an infantry division. While I was there, all of those divisions were changed into training divisions. The 84th Division in Milwaukee, the 85th Division in Chicago, the 70th Division in New Jersey, where I eventually went, they all became, no that was the 78th Division, they all became training divisions. As an MP company we were the MP Company of an infantry division and we were trained in traffic control, prisoner collection and control, and that sort of thing. Until it became a training division, and then the MP Company was eliminated. And I had no job.

Webb: This is in the early 60s?

Alcorn: No... Yes, yes, it was. I graduated from seminary in '59.

Webb: So as somebody kind of responsible for corralling other military personnel, were you starting to see a change in military personnel at that point? Attitudes? I mean, the draft for Vietnam probably hadn't started at that point, so maybe it

wasn't too drastic, but were you seeing a general shift in attitude even from what you saw maybe in the Korean War?

Alcorn: Yes. It was approaching. I don't recall... I should refer to that, refer back to why I was going to be drafted, because I had been released from active duty in the Navy for my convenience. I gave up, even though I was given the WWII Victory Medal, I gave up all other benefits. I didn't qualify for the GI Bill, and I was liable to the new draft when it came out. So, that's why I would have been drafted if I hadn't taken it in hand and handled it myself, and this is an illustration of having learned what the military is like. The military in that matter of draft, the military was not doing for me what I needed to be done for me, so I made it do it by getting that civilian commitment, and then getting out of it as well. There was a degree of manipulation there. Now, it was all legal, I just learned what the loopholes were and I played them to my benefit. And once again, I really don't think the Army, not only did it not benefit... the Army got from me, it might have gotten an MP officer from me, and I might have been forever an MP officer, it got from me something more than I would have been just as that. And as we were approaching the Vietnam crisis, everything changed again. And I was on active duty frequently at that time as a reservist, and also I was very close to it because when I became a pastor in New Jersey, the church of which I pastored in Neptune, New Jersey, was adjacent to Fort Monmouth, and right near Earl Naval Ammunition Depot, Camp Kilmer, Fort Dix, McGuire Air Force Base, and many of my people were active duty people. Even more of them were retirees from active duty who settled in that area. So even though I was a civilian pastor and only a part-time Army Reserve Chaplain, I was regularly in contact with active duty people. For instance, when a new commander, a new major general became commander at Fort Monmouth, as a civilian pastor, I wrote to him, welcoming him to the community and welcomed him to visit our church. And so this major general came in civilian clothes as a civilian worshiper and sat and listened to a civilian pastor preach, although, I was a reserve chaplain, but I knew how to talk with him because I was military. But I learned…I developed a personal relationship with that major general where I learned from him things that, I as a captain then, would never have learned. I wouldn't even have access to that major general. And I used that same kind of approach when later I developed a very personal one-on-one relationship with a four-star general who was one of the senior generals in the United States Army, and at that time I was a major.

Webb: You know, as I was going through your paperwork, I wasn't really sure where to ask these questions. This seems like as good a place as any. You mentioned earlier, you know, the chaplain who didn't really know what his role was in that regard, what is the role of a chaplain in the military?

Alcorn: A motto that I created for myself and that I preached to the chaplains I supervise is, "A chaplain is of the troops, for the troops, and as the troops." That is, “of the troops” in the sense that he is a soldier. He wears the uniform. When I was a pastor in New Jersey, I was a civilian pastor to military personnel, but on active duty, when I'm with the reservists, I put on the uniform, and so I am a soldier, not ministering to soldiers. Not a civilian ministering to soldiers. I am “For the troops;” that is, I am there for every individual as their pastor to minister to them. And I really minister with no rank on my shoulder. There was a time in which I thought that chaplain should minister without rank. They should just be called “Chaplain” and nothing else, and in a sense that's still true because in the Army you're a chaplain and then in parentheses "colonel" or whatever the--or 1st lieutenant, or colonel, or major general. The chief of chaplains is “Chaplain” and in parentheses “major general.” In the Air Force, it’s “Chaplain,” comma, and your rank. In the Navy, it's “Chaplain” and then right after it it’s “CHC,” so you’re always, you're first a chaplain, and you're not addressed by your rank, you're addressed by chaplain. The chief of chaplains, the major general, is still addressed as “Chaplain.” So I used to think that we should be as I was in the CIC, in the counter intelligence. When you’re out and away from the unit, you wore civilian clothes. When you're in the field with a unit, you wear [an] unmarked uniform. Instead of a rank or a branch, you had “US” on both collars, and I thought a chaplain should be that way so that you would be accepted on that. I modified that when I got rank, but it wasn’t because I got rank, I think because I understood it better. Oh, you have rank to use it…to enhance and protect the ministry of chaplain and subordinate units. When I'm colonel, I used my eagle to benefit the captains or chaplains. To say to their commander, “Colonel, you must do this for your chaplain,” and that sort of thing. But I ministered as if I had no rank. I used rank to show that I had experience. I wouldn't be a colonel if I didn't know what I was doing, and they knew that. Often people would say... other officers would say, “Chaplain, use your rank,” and I felt like I accomplished more by not using my rank. For instance, the last chapel service I conducted on active duty while I was, before I retired--now I've conducted services after I retired--on active duty... For active duty people, but as a retiree, but the last one I conducted on active duty, there were only seventeen people in that service, but

fifteen were lieutenant generals, two were four-star generals, one was the chief of staff, the other was the vice chief of staff. That came about because at that point, I was with the military District of Washington serving in the role of the staff chaplain, which would be the job I would have if there was broad mobilization. It was called MobDes, or mobilization designation. The chief of chaplain's staff had called in his corps commanders from all over the world for a weekend conference and he wanted to provide a chapel service for them before they went out on the training he was giving to them so, he, they would need to find a chapel. He wanted a service held right there in the armed for... in the National Defense University, whose classroom he's using. So he asked the MDW chaplain to provide a service, so two of us went over and there was a service for these two four-star generals and fifteen lieutenant generals and I function as if I had no rank at all, and I was perfectly comfortable with these people. I wasn't the least bit intimidated. The reason is I'd had enough experience with lieutenant generals and generals to know. They knew their job, they knew what my job was, they let me do my job and I did my job and we respected each other.

Webb: So, that was two of them. Did you get to the third prong of your motto?

Alcorn: Oh yes, yes. Thank you. "Of the troops," you are a soldier. "For the troops," no matter whether they're a four-star general or they're a private. There are times where I went toe to toe with a very senior officer and told them, and argued for that low ranking private. Let me give one illustration, I think it fits into the Pritzker work here because it involves Maj. Gen. Bill Levine. When I was a chaplain with the 85th Division, regimental chaplain, he became the division commander. I didn't know him. I had heard of him. The word came down--now we're a reserve unit. We have weekend drills and I noticed that we had a drill schedule for when there was…during the Jewish High Days and all observant Jews should have been excused from drills to go to synagogue. It was at a time when many of the people were obligated, there was a term, "Rep. '63," or something of that sort and I would like to recover what that is, but what it was they would serve on active duty for six months and they needed them to spend six months, I mean six years in the reserves, active reserve unit, and if they missed very many drills, they had to go on active duty. So, that they would be excused from drill was very important. They were liable for active duty if they exceeded the number that was allowed, which wasn't very many. So Jewish personnel who went to synagogue, which was their obligation and duty, their

obligation and right during High Days, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, could go on active duty so they were liable. What General Levine had ordered, I couldn't believe, he couldn't do that that was illegal. It was against what the Army was for, and he ought to know that. So I called the division chaplain, a lieutenant colonel. At that time, I was probably a major, I might have been just a captain. I think I was a captain, and I said to him, "Sir, the general can't do this. You know that. Tell him he can't do this." He said, "Not me. If you want to tell him that, you can tell him." I said, "All right, do I, I'm not, if I ask for an audience with him, with Gen. Levine, it will be with your permission. I'm not going over your head." He said, "Yup. You have my permission. Just don't tell him this is what I said, you speak for yourself." And I went as a captain before Gen. Levine, major general, who I didn't know, and he said, "All right, Chaplain, how can I help you?" And I told him in very polite language, "Sir, you can't do this, and you're going to be in trouble if you do." I mean that was the final result, but I told him in a very polite way, and he listened patiently and he said, "Chaplain, that's your position?" I said, "Yes, Sir." And he said, "Are you willing to stand behind this?" And I said, "Yes, Sir, I am. I have to stand behind it." He said, "If I order this to be done and I say I'm doing it because you said I have to do that, will you stand behind that?" And I said "Yes, Sir, I will." And he said, "Good. I've known that's what I had to do. I needed a Christian chaplain to tell me that I had to do that because I'm Jewish, and I didn't want anybody saying, you are only letting the Jews go to high days because you're a Jew. I want to be able to say [that] a Christian chaplain said I have to do this." And so when I went back to the unit, the non-observant Jews, who were as much Jewish as the others, but they were at drill because they wouldn't have gone to synagogue, anyway, they welcomed me with open arms and I was a hero. They called me the, "Rabbi to the uncircumcised." [Laughter] So what I'm saying, I functioned there as a chaplain and I represented these privates. Okay, that's "for the troops." I would do anything "for the troops." "As the troops" I meant that I went through the same thing that the troops go through. I saw a movie once; in fact, it was a movie that I showed in teaching leadership principles at The Adjutant General School. This captain, company commander, sitting in his vehicle while his sergeant was standing out in the rain, and the point they were trying to make, if the sergeant had to sign, to stand in the rain, the captain should be out there standing in the rain getting wet, even if he didn't need to, and I laid it on the chaplains that I supervised, and what I practiced, if they were in the rain, I was in the rain. I stood in line, in the chow line, in the mess line as they did. I was the last one to get food and so forth. I went through the same thing that they went through. So, "Of the troops,

for the troops, and as the troops" I think that's what is a chaplain's job. It's a pastor ministering with the troops in a unique way that a pastor has the opportunity to do.

Webb: Can you talk about denominations and divisions of chaplains in the military? You are of Baptist--background. You've talked little bit about the Jewish background. Were you responsible as a chaplain, you know, a lower chaplain, chaplain to the seven-hundred or whatever troops, to talk to any kind of denomination? Were you, specifically, supposed to talk to other Baptists or how did that actually work in the military?

Alcorn: Well, not only to other churches, but American freedom of religion really also means, freedom from religion, if that's your choice. And as a chaplain who was there to administer religiously, I was, I had as much obligation to administer to my own denomination as I do to other denominations, and to no denominations. And when I had an atheist, who wanted nothing to do with religion, I was obliged to make sure that he wasn't forced into religion. There were many times when well-meaning commanders or first sergeants would line troops up to march them to chapel and I had to say to them, in cases like this, I did it very directly, "You will not do that. It's illegal. You cannot do that." And it was to my benefit. Although I get maximum attendance if I would let... if they let them make chapel mandatory. I would have an involuntary audience and that's a very ineffective audience. I cannot preach to people who are being there because they were made to be there because they close their mind. I close my mind to when I'm made to listen to somebody that I don't want to listen to. And I don't want an involuntary congregation, so it was my job to do that. If I couldn't provide for them, what they needed to be ministered to, then it was my job either to bring it to them or get them to where it was taken. If I couldn't bring a priest to a Catholic, I needed to get them to a civilian Catholic. A humorous illustration of that, and incidentally, it was my job to know what their requirements were better than they knew. There were times when I said to a Catholic, "You can't do that, as a Catholic." At Fort Ord, California, when troops were out of bivouac for a two-week period, we had to bring a service out to them. We went out by helicopter. A priest would conduct mass and I would conduct a Protestant service. One time, I purposefully brought an extra chaplain along to conduct the Protestant service because I wanted to sit in on the field mass to learn what it is that they taught them about how to have mass under combat conditions, because I needed to be able to tell Catholics how to do that. Among other things

for instance, the priest would always assign one man to become the guardian of the host, so if you were attacked, the consecrated wine and bread that he brought for mass, they would have to guard so that nothing happened to it and that man would be individually responsible for that at the cost of his life, if that became necessary. I needed to know that so I could tell Catholics who didn't know that what would be necessary. I'm standing in the back of this field service, just observing. A man got up and came back to me seeing my cross, because the priest had a cross and I had a cross. A rabbi would have a tablet, but I had a cross as he did. And he said, "Father, may talk with you," and I said, said, "Sure, son," because most of the time it wasn't a priest that they needed, it was just a chaplain. So the first thing that you did was find out what he needed, and if you learned that it was really a priest he needed, immediately, you would take care of that. So I said, "Sure how can I help you?" And he said, "Father,"--now remember I am a Baptist chaplain--and he said, "Father, I'm Baptist, but I'm going to marry a Catholic, would you give me instructions on how to become a Catholic?" And I said, "Son, I'm not sure how to tell you this," but it was my delight to help him, although, I didn't think he should have left his Baptist church to become a Catholic, but it was his choice, and I needed to allow him to do that.

Webb: This is a personal question, if you don't want to answer it, that's fine. Do you feel like being a military chaplain made you a better provider to your congregation outside of the military?

Alcorn: Oh, I can't overemphasize how much so. So much so, that when I taught future pastors in a seminary, I urge on them to seek a reserve appointment, at least a reserve appointment, not necessary to make chaplaincy a career, because I learned more practical things as an Army chaplain about being a civilian pastor than my church ever taught me. As a chaplain, they paid for me to go to Hazelden Institute and learn what drug abuse is. They paid for me to go to for Alcoholics Anonymous training to minister to them, and so forth, and as a pastor, in a sense, I made myself the chaplain of the unit. I thought as a chaplain, as a fill in pastor, and I went in to the mayor as if he were the commander of the civilian community and made myself available to him in the same was as a consultant on religious affairs, as I did to commanders. I had a lot of nerve as a civilian pastor because as a chaplain, I was given complete access to everybody in the unit. And…as an active duty chaplain, I could go into a unit and say to the first sergeant, "I need to talk to Private so and so. Would you release him for a little bit?" and he would. I did a similar thing in the civilian life. I would go into a

business and say to the foreman, "I need to talk to Joe so and so for a little bit. Can I call him to the side for a little bit? And then I'll let him get back to it." I mean I didn't do that all the time. I needed to know when I could get away with this. But I did things that my other pastors would say, "How in the world did you ever get away with that?" It's because I thought as a chaplain.

Webb: Okay. What is a chaplain's role in an actual combat situation?

Alcorn: It really is the same thing as ever, except that you have to expedite everything. So far as religious services are concerned, you know, it has to be hit and run. It has to be on the go. You know that, now if you think your sole purpose is to conduct religious services, you're not a chaplain because it's just not possible when you're on the front line. You need to learn how to deliver the equivalent of a religious service to one individual or to two or three men in a foxhole as they're about to be hit. That, when you've left them, they need to have the feeling that they've had the Eucharist or communion. They've had the last rights and they're ready to die, because you've been there, and you've been there for them. So, and that doesn't just happen. It happens because over a period of time. You built a personal relationship with these people, and they say, "You are my pastor. You are my chaplain."

Webb: So, this is maybe the last philosophical questions I'll ask you before we get back into your actual service. Is there ever a conflict between what you're supposed to do in the military realm and what you as a spiritual person understand to be your responsibility?

Alcorn: There is always that potential, but there is always a way to accommodate. And I make a distinction between accommodation and compromise. Accommodation is a reasonable adjustment. It has some give and take. A compromise is where you become something other than what you were. In a mild way, I had that situation in Honduras. We were down there for six months and I was the staff chaplain and also a chaplain trainer. But the task force, it was an engineer task force, was always battling on funds. And the Fifth Army and somebody else was always trying to take people away from them, and they were eliminating one positon after another. And one of the first positions that went was the PAO, the public affairs officer, and the captain that was there as the PAO was sent back and they didn't have a PAO, but they needed one. I already had shown myself able to be a public affairs officer by creating a weekly news sheet for our unit.

The PAO didn't know how to do this. I created a weekly news sheet just summarizing what was happening; who was leaving, who was coming in, and that sort of thing, and it was distributed. Now, the reason I did that could have been a compromise. It wasn't my job. I wasn't there to be a PAO, I was there to be a chaplain, but how did I become a chaplain? How did I get before people? How did people know me, because some of the people are not looking for chaplains? They won't come to a service. They won't walk into a chaplain's tent to say, "I'd like to talk with you chaplain." If I walk in, they may walk away. So how do I get before them? I have to find a way to get before them, other than as a chaplain in a way that is not inconsistent with being a chaplain and being a PAO is one. I'm a writer, I'm an editor. I knew how to write. I knew how to produce a weekly newsletter better than the PAO we happened to have. I was a better PAO than he was. So, I produced this to make myself valuable to the unit, and one of the principles are: Find out what the commander cannot get along without and do it so he cannot get along without you even though he might not want a chaplain. So, I did that and they could get along without a PAO. Well, then the time came when they fired the S-5, the civil affairs officer. Well, I was already having a good relationship with the civilians in the community, and I knew how to get along with them and so I started doing S-5 work when there wasn't an S-5. Now, what I taught as an instructor in the chaplain's school is be a chaplain and nothing but a chaplain. Don't do a PAO's job. Don't do an S-5's job, etcetera…but I was doing it but I could do those things without compromising, not only compromising my role as a chaplain because there's nothing inconsistent with it, but it enhanced the work I did as a chaplain. One way in which it could have been; when we were in Honduras, we had an upfront reason for being there that we were told to give to whoever asked us. And that was an engineer training mission. There was another reason for having troops there, and that's why the Honduran government agreed, it had a status of forces agreement to have us there. And I'll just remind you that it was the time of the Sandinistas government next door in Guatemala [Nicaragua]. The Sandinistas were opposing them. The American government wanted to encourage the Sandinistas and protect them from the...wanted to support, I'm sorry, the Contras- Sandinistas. Okay, so, there were a group of people in our, unannounced, in our base camp that didn't have rank on. They had "US's" on their lapels, and I said, "Well, hi there. How you doing? I know why you're here." And they were requiring, these people were requiring, people that went out beyond the wire that is beyond the concertina wire, around our camp. Whenever they were out and they had contact with the civilian community they were to come in and talk with these men and tell them

what they saw. And so, when my chaplains went out to accompany the medical people to be with them, they were asking my men, my chaplains to come in and to tell them what they saw and to report to them. That is a compromise of a chaplain role. You don't use chaplains as spies, so I made a deal with these men. I told them a little bit about my background. So I could go into this tent any time I wanted and they would talk freely with me. Tell me. They'd really answer any question I asked although I also knew the kind of questions they couldn't answer, so I didn't ask that kind of question. And so the deal was that I would come when my chaplains had been out or I had been out, I would come and tell them what they needed to know because I knew what they needed to know, and they never interviewed these people. So that they could say, "We never interviewed chaplains. We never interviewed chaplains." And yet, they knew what they, what a chaplain could tell them. So, they're all, so there was a tension there, but it didn't do it. And I will tell you this, if I were in combat--and I never was--if I were in combat, I was not allowed, the law did not allow me to carry a weapon and I know what the law was, but if I were in combat, I think that I would… think that my weapon of choice would be a .38 caliber snub-nose, such as I once had as a CI agent that could be worn under-- not to be recognized under the clothing. And I would have it. I would not have it in order to kill enemies, but I would have it to use if it were necessary; to kill an enemy if it were necessary to save the life of one of my soldiers. And I might more motivated to use it to save that rifleman's life than I would be to save my own life. But if I needed to use it…to kill an enemy, to keep that enemy from killing me, which would be to prevent me from doing my job, I think I would have asked God to give me grace, to do a terrible thing that was necessary. To do an evil that happened to be a lesser evil that would have happened otherwise…I think.

Webb: Yeah, it's hard to know. We sort of glossed right through Vietnam. There were certainly some things that I wanted to ask you about. Some points that you said were important for you to talk about, I think. The first was, you're a reserve at this point. Was there a chance that you would be called up and then sent to Vietnam?

Alcorn: Yeah, a very real chance. The first occurred when I was a pastor in New Jersey. I was a new pastor in a new pastorate with a young family, little children, babies; a baby and a toddler, and I received a phone call from the chief of chaplains, a major general, I was a first lieutenant, and he said, "Wally, you're a good chaplain, and I have good reports on you, and I'd like you on active duty, and if I

had the authority to order you to active duty, I would, but I don't have that authority. The law doesn't allow me to do that. I can receive you if you volunteer for active duty, and I'd scoop you up in a heartbeat, but you have to volunteer. I wanna make a deal with you." Now once again, this was not the colonel who was the chief of personnel and ecclesiastical relations. It wasn't a major, who is a recruiter or something of that sort. This is the chief of chaplains himself. He said, "If you volunteer for active duty, I will guarantee all I will take from you is fourteen months. One month to be trained on the job stateside and you can go to Fort Dix [New Jersey] and commute. For twelve months... twelve months on active duty in Vietnam. Six months on the line, and I really need company grade officers, who can serve with a battalion. Six months behind the line where it's safe, one month back at Fort Dix where you're debriefed and where you can decompress. Fourteen months, Wally, that's all I ask for you." And I said, "Sir, if you order me to active duty, I can say to my church, and more importantly I can say to my family, I'm sorry, I have no choice. I'm leaving you, but it's not my choice. They would understand and they would let me go." And I said, "If you're willing to do that, I'm willing to go." And he said, "You know very well that I can't do that." And I said, "Well, that's the way it is." That was the first time. Then when we were on annual training at Fort Dix, New Jersey, the 78th Division, we were called to a classified meeting -- the division staff down to the staff of regiments, not any below because I was regimental chaplain I was there. The word was given to us, President Johnson is going to activate…he gave a number. I don't know what it was, three or four training divisions. To activate training centers that are not activated now. The 78th Division will go to Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, and create a training division there. Because our experience is that the reserve training divisions can create training divisions more quickly than active duty units can create a training division. We need you and we're going to use you. The 78th Division will go to Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, as soon as Congress recesses for the summer. When they go back to their districts, he will give an executive order activating three divisions, or whatever that number was, in year one. You are not allowed to tell anybody this, but we are telling you this so that the unit can be prepared and so that you are prepared. You need this now, for instance, in your case, you need to now make provisions for somebody to come in and fill in as an interim pastor. When Congress was adjourned, Johnson got cold feet and that didn't happen so our division wasn't activated. That's the second time. Third time, it would not have been as a chaplain, but I had created a program on WMBI Chicago, the station Moody Bible Institute flagship station called, "In Uniform," that was as a civilian, but with my knowledge as a military

chaplain; we would be interviewing active duty people to help families at home know what their family would be like while they were on active duty. To gather material for that, the 85th Division gave me exposure beyond my own active duty. They sent me places, they paid for it. I wasn't there as a chaplain, but I wore a chaplain's uniform. They paid the cost to gather information. One of these was, I was scheduled to actually go to Vietnam, as a journalist. So I go as a civilian, and I was scheduled on a plane, and the stick for which I was scheduled, was the first one that was canceled for a civilian journalist as they began to close down. So I twice almost went as a chaplain. I almost went as a civilian, but because I was a reserve chaplain. So, almost three times. But never any of those times.

Webb: We did an interview with a Vietnam vet, that when he was done with his time, he came back into California on a Saturday and on Sunday went to church, and faced the kind of -- opposition is not the right word -- abhorrent behavior from the community that you've alluded to in the past. People stood up in the middle of the service and shouted at him as he was wearing his uniform. As a civilian pastor, did you ever have cause to talk to talk to community members about anti-war? How do you sort of balance that as a military man yourself?

Alcorn: In a word, I remind people that we need to balance moral sensitivity with social responsibility. I actually have more examples of this as a police department chaplain because police officers more frequently and more directly, and more regularly, come into the position of killing or not killing, and often injuring a person is as traumatic emotionally for a police officer as it is actually to kill it. Many military people kill people and they don't even know it. Or they wound a person and they don't know that he died later and so forth. But I have been with police officers as they shoot into people and wound them. I've been with them when they have killed people, and it became my job, they're taken offline. It's my job to sit down with them and talk them through this. So, I've really learned more about that than a police chaplain as I... one of the reasons I became a police chaplain was because I was already experienced as an Army chaplain. And, a police officer, we want a police officer who does not want to kill somebody. He doesn't even want to injure a person. We don't even want him to hurt the person's feelings or emotions verbally, but we wanted an officer who is willing to do it when it is really necessary. Who knows that it's always evil to hurt somebody, but be willing to do the lesser evil to prevent a greater evil from occurring? A police officer arrives on a scene, and he sees a man with a drawn

weapon, has already killed somebody and he's pointing it at a defenseless person; who is willing to shoot that man to kill him and also to pay the emotional cost after he's done it. I worry about the police officer, who can injure somebody and take it as just part of the job. I'm encouraged about him when he cries…and he's torn apart by it. I want him to be emotionally affected, but I also want him to recover and go back to the job and be able to do it again. I've tried to explain this to soldiers somehow. We can never kill out of love, but we can kill, in love. That is we need to love people well enough that we are willing to do a thing that is not a loving thing to do, but we do the unloving thing because we love people.

Webb: Yeah…Let me just ask you, because we're about, I would guess two hours in at this point. Do you need a break or anything?

Alcorn: No it's okay.

Webb: Okay. How did the military change after World War…I mean…after Vietnam?

Alcorn: Well, one it really changed after World War II, as you started to say. During WWII, in many ways, it was an amateurish Army. The standing Army…coming out of a period of peace, they were doing such things, as some of the officers that I dealt with during the Korean period had been military Army officers with CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] units. They were really just being house mates, for were people who were essentially civilians, just in unmarked Army uniforms. They really weren't prepared to go to war when WWII began, and Pearl Harbor is a perfect example of that. They just were not thinking war, and we got caught. So, the professionals, as it were, were really not professionals they were just careerists, and then you brought in a bunch of civilians who didn't know war either, even those who had been National Guard or Army Reserve. They really learn in that reserve thing, but they were ready, and they learned very, very quickly, and sometimes they did very unprofessional things, but they worked. They even did some illegal things, but they worked. They did things that shouldn't have worked, but they did. Now, a lot of times it didn't work, and I look at what happened during World War II and I shake my head and wonder, how did we ever win that war? And the answer is because we wanted to win that war. We wanted, very badly to win that war, and we did. Somehow, by hook or by crook we won it. So after World War II, as World War II ended, it wasn't a professional Army. It was an Army that was very lucky. And it had to become professional, and it did. And when I went through basic...when I went through

boot camp, and even more through Army basic training, where I was more alert to what was happening. It was not good training. They didn't know how to train. The cadre is what we, the cadre, the skeleton, it's a French word, really didn't know how to train people. They didn't know what they were doing, but they did the right thing, even if not for the wrong reason, even if not for the right reason. And it works, sort of. By the time I returned as a chaplain to active duty, basic training units. And was chaplain to trainees and was chaplain to the cadre. I found professional people. I found sergeants and corporals who cared for their troops with a kind of care, honest care, that would, that earlier you were lucky to get in a professional officer. I found NCO's who thought and acted with a sense of responsibility that only used to be possible among officers. At least you had to be an E-7 with twenty years' experience before you would have that. I found cadre who worked very hard to train their troops and I found cadre talking to me about my soldier. They would say to me, "Chaplain, can you help me with my soldier." It was a sense of possession, of responsibility for them, and I tried to communicate to the trainees, "Don't worry about passing basic training. You're going to think that you can't do it because they're going to demand things from you, you are sure that won't come out of you, but it will. And it isn't just that I believe in you, I believe in your sergeants because it is as important… more important to the sergeants that you pass, then it is to you. And the biggest guarantee that you're going to finish basic training is the determination of your sergeants that you will." And so I found a professional Army. Now, okay, so, during Vietnam. What happened during Vietnam, is that they made waging war a way of life, and they must never do that. Waging war must never be a way of life. It must be a thing that you're prepared to do if it's necessary and to be good at it, but not do it unless you're made to do it, and not be made to do it unless it's necessary to do it. A simple thing. During World War II, you went out and you toughed it. You had K rations, which were not tasty, not enjoyable. They were just marginally nourishing, and that's all. It was a good thing to try to make meals enjoyable. It'd be nice if they were both efficient and enjoyable. It's what they tried to do with the MRE, Meals Ready to Eat, which of course, the troops called Meals Rejected by Ethiopians. MRE's were better than K rations and C rations and I started out with C Rations and went to MRE's, but when you, but then, maybe that was the limit. But then, that wasn't enough. Then they were going to bring in hot meals, three times a day, into combat every day. You're going to have good meals when you're facing the enemy as you'd have if you were back in garrison. And that's a mistake because they made it too comfortable to be in combat. They made being in combat a way of life so that the goal was not to win

the war. The goal was to wage the war and get credit for it. The goal was to have a good body count, to have a better body count than the next battalion. And if you killed a number of people but made no advance against the enemy that was good enough. You put in your six months, halfway through that, you went to a nice R&R. Put in your six months, went to the rear for another six months and you went back home. That's no way to win a war. That's no way to run a country.

Webb: Is it also the catalyst for why we are seeing more PTSD and some of those?

Alcorn: Yes, I think so. Yeah. Because we force people to stay in combat longer than any sane person can possibly stay in combat and remain sane. Other things that happen physically. The improvement over World War II, is there were thousands who died in the battlefield who did not need to die anywhere because they couldn't get them out of the battlefield soon enough. We improved over that, so in Korea, we got them off the battlefield and they lived. During Vietnam many died. During Desert Storm, we got them off the battlefield right away. We got off the battlefield right away people who should have died on the battlefield because they weren't going to live anyway. And now they're not really living. They don't have arms, they don't have legs. They might not even have a mind, and I wonder…we saved their lives. Our medical people were told to save their lives and they did their job, they did save their lives…but what kind of a life was saved. Of course, they shouldn't let them die. They should have done everything they can to save their lives no matter what was left, and we'd be playing God if we did otherwise. But there are people that I think, really, I've met them. I know things about what happened in Vietnam and what had happened in Iraq that some people in Vietnam didn't know because on the staff of Madigan Army Medical Center [Tacoma, Washington] and Fitzsimmons Army Medical Center [Aurora, Colorado], I talked for hours with these people. They didn't die in the battle field, but they died when they were my patient. [Long pause, deeply emotional] I was holding their hand when the monitor went flat. Sometimes I wonder, if what happened to me then, was any worse than what would have happened if in combat. There are things chaplains, who are in terrible combat, who are terribly wounded, learned about combat that I don't know, but there are things that I learned about combat that they never learned, too. There are times I'll apologize to combat veterans, as I thank them for what they went through. Yet, I think that I understand things that maybe they don't. It helps me to bear the guilt of being here when they are not, and every time I conducted a military funeral, whether it was KIA [killed in action], whether they died because

they were in combat, or whether they died because they were in the service, or whether they just died despite the fact that they were in the service, not because they were in service. I look at that body and say, "It could have been me." And I don't know what it wasn't. I remember being with a man on Omaha Beach on one of the anniversary of D-Day, and I asked him to tell me about his experience, and he started to cry, and I said, "No, no, you don't have to tell me." He said, "Yes, Sir I do." And by then he knew I was a chaplain, and I think that he was willing to trust me. He went on to Normandy, something like D-Day plus 2 and he went right away to a repo depot, a replacement depot, and he went through and he fought in combat, and years later, he was in his seventies, he came back to visit the beach, and he learned some history. And he said, "You know, Chaplain, I learned yesterday, that when I reported in to that depot, my life expectancy was thirty-six hours, and I'm back here, and I keep saying, 'Why me? Why did they die?'" And I guess what he -- I hope has -- learned and certainly, what I learned, is because I'm here now, there's something I need to do with the life that I have, and I think that what I'm doing right now is a little bit toward that. And that's why, also, I raised a soldier. And although, I never attempted to raise a soldier out of him, he saw how much I was benefiting out of being a soldier. And Stephan kept a set of fatigues as a little boy, and I bought for him, the smallest pair of combat boots that the Army sells and I think it was intended for WAC [Women's Army Corps], and he kept that uniform and he kept changing it. He promoted himself to captain by the time he got out of that, and he became and ROTC [Reserve Officer Training Corps] cadet, and was a distinguished military graduate and became an armor officer, and he was in the first wave of the 1st Armored Division that went into combat in Iraq.

Webb: So at that point, you've got three different hats: military man, chaplain, pastor, and father.

Alcorn: Yeah. You know, and I... I have conducted, I have the count. I have thirty funerals that I conducted in the Chicago area, all Vietnam veterans, all people killed in Vietnam or died because of it. I've conducted many other funerals, but at least these here, and that was during the Vietnam period. I also had been on details of death notification, KIA notification, and line officer would go along with me, early in Vietnam, I was the one asked to tell people that their son or their husband had been killed. We learned later that I needed to separate ourselves from that. If I was the one who brought the word, I had lost my effectiveness as a chaplain. I was associated with it. So, it developed to the point where a line

officer would come and he would be the death notification officer, and we even made a separation after that. The line officer, who would tell them that this one had been killed, that would be the last time they would see him. He would be, succeeded by, what is it? Survivor Assistance Officer, SAO, and he would be the one that would help out with all of the details because he was not associated with that. So, I would go along with him. Never, on one of these death notifications, was the line officer, and he was almost always a captain, had they ever done that before. I suppose they tried to rotate this. They didn't want too much of the same one. So nobody was experienced, and they would all say to me, "Chaplain," as we'd drive in the sedan, "Chaplain, how do you do this? How do you get used to this?" I'd say, "You never do. You never get used to it." And they'd say, "Well, I'm afraid of saying the wrong thing." I said, "You have good reason to say the wrong thing, because you will. It's inevitable. The one thing that I've learned, is that the more you worry about saying the wrong thing, the sooner you say it and the worse it will be. So, you may as well relax and know that you're going to say the wrong thing and so, and when you do say, ‘'I'm sorry. That was a dumb thing to say.' And they'll understand." That was really illustrated in one case that I remember. It was in Minnesota, and we told this mother that her marine son had been killed, and she sat there for a long time, and another thing that I learned, is, you know, it's hard for a chaplain who is a professional speaker, not to talk. One of the big things I've tried to teach my chaplains is, learn when to shut your mouth. And when you told the person, or the other officers told the other person, that your son or your daughter, or your husband has been killed, the only thing you can say is, “I'm sorry”. Whatever you say after that, they're never going to hear. There's no point in saying anything at all. And one of the hardest things that a chaplain needs to learn is to shut up because if you're talking, you're doing something. You're doing something when you stay there. So this woman sat there for the longest time, you know, five minutes seems like a half an hour. Finally, she looked up at me, and I have to use her words in order to get the emotion across, she said, “You sure have a s**ty job." She understood. I did have that kind of a job. Fathers never said, and I thank that one person did because I can tell my chaplains, I can tell the other SAO's, they understand, even when they don't understand that they understand. Now, I was answering some question, but I'm not sure what the question was.

Webb: [Chuckles] Yeah, I don't remember either…A chaplain has, you know, a spirituality, but as a person, as a human, you also have self-doubt. And I can imagine that even in non-combat situations, even in situations you've just gotten

done describing, there is a certain level of PTSD, some kind of it. Probably those kinds of thing are just now being diagnosed. Who do you go to, is it just other chaplains? Who do you go to for counsel for relief?

Alcorn: Sometime other chaplains, yes. A role that, a surprising role that I filled as a reserve chaplain and still fill as a retired chaplain; when we'd go on active duty every year for two weeks. There are active duty people there, who know that you're a chaplain and so you understand what they're going through, but you're not in the chain of command, and you're not going to stay there. And almost every time that I've gone on active duty for two weeks annual training, at least one chaplain is dumped on me because he knows that I understand, and he knows that I probably won't tell anybody, just because I am a chaplain, but because I'm a reserve chaplain, I'm going to leave, I may not get the chance to do so. But you also somehow, wonder how... and I learned later, somehow, very quickly, to let the chaplains that we were with know that we're the kind of person that they can trust. In teaching my chaplains, in teaching my seminarians, I tried to point out to them the distinction between accessibility and approachability. Accessibility is having announced hours when you're in the chapel and you're always there, and they can always find that you're there and they can talk to. It also means, even more so, always being out where the troops are, so that they never need to look for you, all they need to do is look up and there's a chaplain. That's accessibility. Approachability is even more difficult. It's to establish rapport. It's to develop, to communicate somehow, by your attitude, the way you talk, by the look in your eye, that you are a chaplain that they can trust, that they can afford to come to and spill out the worst of things, and they're not going to be hurt because of it. And I tried to communicate to them, "I can't always help you, but I can promise you, I'll never hurt you. You'll never be sorry that you came to see me."

Webb: I, you know, have lost track of exactly where we are in your timeline. So, you know, we touched upon Honduras a little bit, you've done a lot of very interesting things like the radio programs. So, I guess, unless you, if there are some stories you'd like to tell, that'd be great. We can go back to them, but I guess I'd like to get to the point where you have to retire. Like, I guess they say, "All right Sir, no more. By law you can't be in the military anymore." And kind of what that experience was like. I mean, it's obvious that you still have, in that particular role, maybe that's different than other aspects of military, but it seems

like you have lots more to give, so what is the experience like when they says it's enough?

Alcorn: Yeah, I was required by law to retire when I became sixty. So, it was forty-three years of service, and I don't know that, how, legally, how anyone could have had more service. Hyman Rackovee? Reckerbee? Hyman…? What was his name, that vice-admiral, the head of the nuclear submarines?

Webb: Rickover.

Alcorn: Rickover. Okay, he did, but there were special provisions by Congress allowing him to do that, and probably there were some four-star generals or admirals in WWII that went beyond retirement and so forth, and they may have had more, but by law, nobody could do that. And one of the reasons I survived that law, is that when I was…when I was fifty-three and a lieutenant colonel, I should have been, the law required that I be out because if you can't be promoted to colonel by then, then you have to retire. Even though you don't have...even though...you couldn't retire...draw retirement pay until you are age sixty, but you can't develop anymore retirement points or do any more work until you're sixty and so forth. And then if you can become a colonel, then you could go to age fifty-five, but when I was at that point, there was a provision that the chief of chaplains could extend a selected number, that he would select, of chaplains, to extend for two years beyond the mandatory retirement age; MRE, MRD, mandatory remove date, yeah. It was a wicked term there, and he gave me such an extension because he felt that he wanted me. Then as those ran out, I protested that I should have been selected for colonel, but I was not, and nobody could figure this out, and so, an investigation was done, and they found out, and I'm not sure if was an IG [Inspector General] investigation or what it was, but at least an investigation was made. They found out that my best OER's [Officer Evaluation Reports], officer efficiency report, were not reaching the promotion selection, promotion consideration board, and therefore I was not being selected, even though I was getting very good OER's. My best OER's were from major active duty, major general OER's. If anything should get a reserve officer promoted, it would be a number one man from an active duty major general, but those OER's were not making it to the promotion selection board. One can imagine all sorts of things that would happen, all we know for sure is what did not happen, and then finally, this was turned over to the Army Board for the Correction of Military Records, and they determined that yes, something

is wrong here. And they're the people that discovered, they're the ones who looked over these promotion consideration files, what was there, and they knew the OER's that were submitted and they were not there. So, they put an order out that I could not be removed from the roles; I could not be retired; could not be sent to the control group or anything could be done with me without their approval. And so that held me on until they completed their investigation, and then finally, so then what did happen is when a board did select me and said, "Yeah, okay, he is in the zone of consideration, he can be selected." After they selected me, and they adjourned, they reconvened as what was informally called a re-look board. It was a reconsideration board, as if they were the board that met the previous year although they were not, they were different people. But they were given the same promotion consideration file that should have been there then but was not, and so they looked at it and said, "Now, as the previous board, if we had seen all of these OER's would we have selected them," and their answer is, "Yes, we would have." So, it was backdated a year. Having done that, they reconvened as the board the previous year and they did that three times until they were four years back. So they were saying, that for four years, I should have been selected for O-6, and therefore, when I was selected for O-6, it was backdated for four years. And the humorous thing about that is that much of the duty that, in the last eight years that I had in reserve, before I retired, I was in active duty, by my count 75% of the time, and it was all the way from one day when I never left my home because I was assigned a writing project, to six months in Honduras on active duty, forty-five days, thirty days, I taught at The Adjutant General School, I had special projects, I controlled at LOGEX [Logistical Exercise] things of that sort. Much of this, except for some of the boards that I served on, would not tolerate and O-6, it costs too much money, but I got the duty because I was only an O-5, but once I was promoted to O-6 and it was backdated, for all of that duty, the Army had to pay me as an O-6. And so, I went to Fort McCoy to the finance office with two banker boxes of orders and I documented everything that I had done, except for one, and it was when I was on TDY [Temporary Duty] from Honduras to Panama, and that was only because there were no orders and the 416th ENCOM command [Engineer Command], ENCOM, simply neglected to cut the orders, which they did retroactively because I could document that, that I did it, and so I could document every one of those. So, I was getting back-paychecks every two weeks, they were coming in the mail, because every one of these discrete duties had to be funded separately, which really then messed up my income tax. [Laughter] Oh, okay, so then I would say, then it came when I had to retire because that's what the law said, but even

then... Now, there I was as MobDes [Mobilization Designee], and Military District of Washington, one of the last things I did in my role as staff chaplain, acting if I were the chaplain because that's what I would do if there were full mobilization, is I wrote the program for the orientation of chaplains for Arlington National Cemetery. And the program that I had is the three services there, their chaplains function separately cause there was only one or two, but at a time of full mobilization, my recommendation was that they would come together with an Army chaplain as senior to all of these others and so the uh, full-time active duty staff special... staff chaplain designated me as to be the senior Armed Forces chaplain at Arlington National Cemetery, if there would be full mobilization, which at that point everybody expected. And therefore, in mobilization planning, I was already in the computer to be recalled from retirement and would be assigned from that job as senior armed forces chaplain at Arlington if there were the amount of casualties that everybody expected, and as far as I know, as far as anybody knows, my son could have been among them, and I often thought, this is where I was heading when I talked about serving on these death notification teams. I often wondered what it would be like, to sit in my home in Minnesota, and see an Army sedan pull out and two officers get out…could I have handled that? And I'm not sure, with all my expertise, would have made it any easier for me. There was this. When…the night we saw that they attacked in Iraq in 1990, or yeah, I guess that would have been '90 or maybe '91, I sat with my wife, and her mother and we knew Stephan would be into this because he was a tank platoon leader in the 1st Armor Division. They were right there. And he was, in fact, as we learned later. And, I explained to mom, to grandma, all of the provisions, all of the procedures to keep people safe in combat, and they're there, and they're real, and they're good, but one of the things I learned about the military, about the government, isn't just the military, you could have the very finest procedures and SOP's and plans, but it only takes one person to goof up and the whole thing could fall apart. So, I knew all that they did to keep them, and I quit at that time…but I didn't tell them about the others. My wife looked at me, and she proved herself a soldier's wife, and she said, "Are you just saying that so I don't worry?" And I thought now it's my turn to trust her and I said, "Yeah," and she said, "Okay," and we went on from there.

Webb: Again, I can't imagine the different hats, especially the father hat. Has to be a hard one. But there are moments where it seemed like it was pretty cool, pinning your son, you want to talk about that experience and what that was like

as a military man, but also as a father, to see you son's success and to be able to participate in that?

Alcorn: Let me tell you this, too, this history. They were literally in the first wave that went in against the Iraqi Republican Guard. He said he was going in, when the word came, move forward, he looked at his watch, he calculated back to what time it was…in the United States and he said, "It was church time." He said, "I knew that from the Atlantic to the Pacific, at that time or about that time, it was Sunday, people were praying for us," and he said, "And I looked up out of the turret and there was a Huey hovering over us, a gunship," not a Huey, "a gunship, a Blackhawk hovering over us, watching over us." And he said, "That's my angel." You know, when this was all over, shortly after they redeployed to Germany, my wife and I went over, and I sat with him--I was retired now--I sat with him and his fellow platoon leaders in Germany, and we debriefed, and it was different from before, when there was official debriefing. And those men told me things that they never told anybody because I was their comrade's father. They told me things that I have never and will never tell my wife or anybody else, but I was no longer a chaplain. But there was a good thing, in addition, there were no casualties that came, from my being retired, is I was in the civilian community while Desert Storm was going on, and I had more than 100 radio broadcasts, television appearances, articles that I had written in the papers, public appearances, invocations at occasions. I was in a position of helping families back home in a way that nobody could do if they hadn't just recently gone through what I had gone through, even to the point of when we not have heard from our son when the war was over, and normally would have. Everybody else didn't. My guess was, and I guess rightly, he was letting his soldiers be first to go back, they had to go to a long distance to where they had phone booths to call back, uh, but I had the phone number of the staff chaplain in Desert Storm, who through all of this became a personal friend. And so I called him and I said, "All I need to know is that Stephan is okay, I don't need to talk with him." And see he said, "I'll look into that." So, I'm not sure what he did but it went down line and he called me back, "One of my chaplains has eyeballed him." Probably my son didn't even know that there was a chaplain that visited to make sure that he was there to make sure he was okay, and eventually he called back and told me, "Yes, he did." So, one of the strange things about my military experience, is so many things did not work the way they were supposed to work. I was treated unfairly. They were illegal. Somehow…I think, God has looked on this country with a favor that he has never been able to give to any other

country, and we just need to stay close to God. Not only individual and in our own way, but even as a country.

Webb: I can't think of a more profound way to end than that. There is so much here. Your experience is so vast and fascinating. We always conclude these interviews with, was there anything that you thought we'd talk about today that we didn't? I have so many more questions, but I don't...

Alcorn: Well, there are so many things surely that we don't have. And I feel a responsibility...you know, when I was in the 85th Division and Bill Levine, and I guess I never called him Bill, but I think of him as Bill, because he treated me in that way. He showed so much favor to me. The last thing that happened, is that he asked me to become his division chaplain, but I didn't because I was already to go to the scheduled to teach in a seminary, except for the first few months of the seven years, he was always the division commander that I was there and he did so much to help me. But all that, during that time, I never knew what he had gone through and what he had seen at Dachau, was it Dachau, yes, yeah, and I visited Dachau. None of [us] knew because he wasn't telling anybody then. And finally because he was asked, I think at Highland, [Illinois] to talk to a high school, somehow he sensed, "I have an obligation to tell what I saw," and he was willing to pay the cost--and listen--it was a cost. It isn't a thing that is easily said, you have to dredge up things that he tried, successfully, for years to forget. And, it's so strange, even in his death, Bill Levine has been my model, and he has really said to me, "You've got to tell these things." And it isn't easy for me. I'm embarrassed, crying like this, and I kind of write it off. I've had three strokes, neurologists tell me I cry very easily, but they also tell me that I'm most likely to cry when I'm happy, and even these terrible things that I have to talk about, I came through, and I'm stronger. I'm more of a person because I did. So there's even happiness in some of the bad things.

Webb: Yeah. Yeah, I think you know, this program, this thing that I get to be a part of, I mean you hear so many different kinds of stories and so many different kinds of experiences, and you get to share in the emotions that people have, that you otherwise wouldn't know. I could have passed you on the street, I could have passed General Levine, on the street, and I wouldn't have known.

Alcorn: Eventually I will put these in writing. Now, it's easy from 1957 on because I've kept a journal, and the media tasks as I'm OCRing, optical character recognition,

my typed journals since then, and I have other documents prior to that, and what is handwritten, I'm using voice recognition. But I do feel an obligation that, eventually, I'll get all of this in writing, and in a time when I can think it through, and say, “No, that’s not the way I should say this,” or, “No, I just read my journal, and that’s really not what happened.” So, there's a value to this extemporaneous exposure. There's a different kind of value to the thought-through edited manuscript.

Webb: Yeah, absolutely. Well, I thank you for your time today, I’m not going to say, that I’m not going to bug you again for a part two as I go through this again and think, man, we should have talked about that or that, but I thank you for your time today.