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U.S. Vietnam War Commander, Gen. William Westmoreland, Conducts Oral History Project with Two IWU History Majors

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**Interview Spans "Westy's" Life & Times; Vietnam Command, 1964-68
Students Also Play Golf with 81-Year-Old General**

Editor's Note: *Christopher La Jeunesse of Elburn, Ill., is one of the students who conducted an oral history with Gen. William Westmoreland (ret.), commander of U.S. troops in Vietnam. La Jeunesse is a senior majoring in history at Illinois Wesleyan University and a graduate of Sandwich Community High School in Sandwich, Ill. His parents, Daniel and Linda La Jeunesse reside at 43 W 991 Nottingham Dr., Elburn, Ill.*

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.--He commanded more than a half-million U.S. troops in Vietnam. Controversy surrounded his command especially in the aftermath of the bloody 1968 Tet Offensive, when communist forces attacked more than 30 provincial capitals--and the U.S. embassy compound in Saigon--triggering calls for a massive influx of 206,000 additional U.S. troops. He wrapped up a distinguished military career, serving as Army Chief of Staff, the Army's top-ranking uniformed officer.

Retired Gen. William Westmoreland--West Point graduate; field artillery man; veteran of World War II's Kasserine Pass North African battle, where his guns caught the Nazis by surprise, earning a Presidential Unit citation; chief of staff of the famed 82nd Airborne Division at age 32; and a brigadier general at age 38 in the aftermath of the Korean War--was to many the symbol of the U.S. commitment and frustration in Vietnam.

Westmoreland, who turns age 81 on March 26, sat down last month with two Illinois Wesleyan University seniors for an oral history, tracing his life and career.

The students were Christopher La Jeunesse, a history major from Sandwich, Ill., a town 20 miles southwest of Aurora, and Matt Nelson, a history and political science major, originally from Sandwich, who now calls

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Cary, N.C. home.

Among Westmoreland's observations were:

- He wishes that he would have given the press more information about the "surprise" Tet Offensive, based on intelligence reports, even though it would have aided the North Vietnamese. Westmoreland believes this would have saved Washington some embarrassment. The students quoted Westmoreland as saying that if he had done this "it wouldn't have looked like a defeat for U.S. intelligence."

- He recalled an incident when he returned to the United States and met with former President Dwight Eisenhower. Eisenhower, supreme allied commander in World War II, told Westmoreland that he had an awesome responsibility as Vietnam commander. Westmoreland didn't see their situations as comparable, noting that Ike commanded more than five million soldiers. Ike replied, according to Westmoreland, his situation in World War II was a "walk in the park compared to yours," referring to the political conflict that surrounded the Vietnam War.

- Despite the beating he took in the news media, Westmoreland said Vietnam was America's first "uncensored" war and that he was in favor of that policy. He said he tried to help reporters cover the war--even making available to them his helicopters--but felt betrayed by the coverage. The IWU students quoted Westmoreland as saying: "I helped them report the war and they stabbed me in the back." For example, Westmoreland saw the U.S. response to the Tet Offensive as a military victory, but news accounts labeled it a defeat. Westmoreland observed that territory lost in Tet was recovered in a matter of days, noting that in World War II it might take months to recover lost ground.

- He discussed his relations with President Richard Nixon as Army Chief of Staff and the politics surrounding establishment of the all-volunteer Army. Looking back, he told the students, he's in favor of the all-volunteer Army. It improved the Army and made it a better force. However, Westmoreland said he said the draft had a positive effect on U.S. society, particularly in how it pulled disadvantaged minorities out of ghettos and

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taught them leadership and pride.

- He also recounted how as Army Chief of Staff he traveled to all 50 states, speaking on college campuses about the military and the war in Vietnam. Westmoreland seemed to enjoy his memories of on-campus debates with students and faculty, saying he was trying to give the other side of the story. The IWU students said Westmoreland recalled some conflict on campuses when he appeared, but he spoke of cheering audiences and the opportunities he had to defend his soldiers.

La Jeunesse and Nelson taped wide-ranging interviews with Westmoreland at his home in Charleston, S.C., as part of a research project conducted during IWU's four-week January Term, when students study a single subject in-depth on campus or pursue internships, research projects, and travel courses off campus.

The students' first of two meetings with Westmoreland was Jan. 17, a two-and-one-half hour session in the general's family room surrounded by family pictures on bookshelves and the piano, as well as gifts he acquired traveling around the world as a U.S. military officer.

Relaxed and dressed in a gray business suit, Westmoreland answered questions spanning his childhood to an overview of his military career.

Westmoreland told the students "my life is an open book." They said he often thought reflectively before answering a question. Their questions frequently sparked anecdotes, which the general prefaced with the remark: "You don't want to hear about that . . .," then launching into the story.

"His days as a West Point Cadet were very interesting," La Jeunesse recalled. "He was captain of his graduating class in 1936 and Westmoreland went to the Superintendent, asking that Gen. Pershing [U.S. commander in World War I] be invited as commencement speaker. It was done. At the graduation ceremony, Pershing presented to Westmoreland a saber with an inscription along the lines of 'from the first captain, class of 1886, to the first captain, class of 1936.' It was a great memory from Westmoreland's early career."

Meeting Westmoreland was a motivational experience for Nelson.

"Listening to him," Nelson said, "he made you want to do a lot more

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with your life. He kept repeating the Latin phrase for 'time flies' and he encouraged us not to put things off until later, saying the older you get the quicker time flies.

"At the end of the interview," Nelson added, "we turned off the tape recorder and talked broadly for an hour or two about the state of the world. Westmoreland said that if you turned on the news all you hear is how bad things are for the U.S. But the U.S., he said, is the only power out there and we have the power to do anything we want. He has a very positive attitude."

However, Westmoreland cautioned against the United States feeling either too arrogant or content, noting either extreme will "kill us."

Reflecting on the experience, Nelson said: "Westmoreland is a man of stature in history. However, he was comfortable answering our questions, showing us around Charleston, and playing golf with us. It's clear that he still feels that he has a duty to serve the public."

Westmoreland took the students golfing at his country club on Jan. 19. He drove them to the links in his mid-80's Buick Skylark. They played at a quick pace, with the 18-hole game taking just two-and-one-half hours. It was a casual round, no score keeping. However, it was clear that the general beat La Jeunesse. As the threesome negotiated the links, Westmoreland talked about the course, as well as his life as a young Army officer and the circumstances of how he met his wife. He also discussed the history of Charleston.

The oral history project began last summer, when IWU President Minor Myers, jr., met Westmoreland at a meeting of the Society of Cincinnati, a group whose relatives fought in the American Revolution. Myers asked the general if he'd be interested in doing an oral history with IWU students.

When Myers and Associate Professor Paul Bushnell, chairperson of IWU's history department, discussed the project with La Jeunesse and Nelson, the students' initial reaction was "this is an opportunity we can't pass up."

Myers wrote Westmoreland about the students and last December La Jeunesse called the general to firm up the arrangements to meet in January

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after Westmoreland and his wife returned from London.

La Jeunesse and Nelson are wrapping up a joint paper for Bushnell to complete their academic requirements. Their paper will recount and analyze Westmoreland's reminiscences. It also will examine problems and issues surrounding oral histories. Each student also is responsible for specific portions of the paper. For example, Nelson is writing the section dealing with Vietnam and the news media, while La Jeunesse is writing the section examining the Battle of Khe Sanh, a small U.S. base used as a launch point against communist sanctuaries in Laos, which became the scene of a two-month battle in 1967; communists lost an estimated 10,000 lives, while U.S. Marines were killed in action.

La Jeunesse intends to use portions of the Westmoreland oral history for his senior seminar project, which focuses on the 1942 invasion of North Africa, Operation Torch, where Westmoreland distinguished himself as an artillery officer.

After graduation in May, Nelson plans on attending law school, perhaps at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. La Jeunesse, who will graduate in December, intends to join the U.S. Marine Corps after graduation, following in the footsteps of his uncle, a Marine aviator.

For La Jeunesse, who plans a military career, the opportunity to meet Westmoreland took on special meaning. "He reached the pinnacle of a military career," La Jeunesse said. "For me, it was the chance to talk to the ultimate role model.

"Westmoreland," he added, "was a simple man who was forced into tough, unpleasant situations--and did the job well. He understands that he has harsh critics--but he doesn't lose sleep over them. He did the best he could for the United States and his soldiers."

La Jeunesse is the son of Daniel and Linda La Jeunesse of 43 W. 991 Nottingham Dr., Elburn, Ill. Mr. La Jeunesse is with Ameritech's leasing division. Mrs. La Jeunesse is a nurse's assistant.

Nelson is the son of William (deceased), a career U.S. Army officer, and Jackie Nelson, a retired nurse, of 130 Winners Circle, Cary, N.C.

IWU, founded in 1850, enrolls about 1,800 students in a College of

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Liberal Arts, College of Fine Arts, and a four-year professional School of Nursing. In recent years, the university's endowment has grown to more than \$92 million; a \$15 million athletics and recreation center opened in the fall of 1994; and a \$24 million science building will open in 1995. The Carnegie Commission for the Advancement of Teaching promoted Illinois Wesleyan to a "Baccalaureate I" institution in 1994, a classification that places it among 164 highly selective National Liberal Arts Colleges in the annual *U.S. News & World Report* rankings. *U.S. News* ranks IWU the second most efficient national liberal arts college--a key gauge of the campus' quality academic program and relatively reasonable cost. *Barron's Profiles of American Colleges*, another respected college guide, rated IWU "highly competitive (+)" in its latest edition. IWU's 1994 freshman class scored an average 27.9 on the ACT exam, compared to the national average of 20.7.

Editor's Note: For more information, contact: Christopher La Jeunesse and Matt Nelson at 309/828-8140.