Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone. I’m continuing my oral history interview with Dr. Ron Milam. Today is January 31, 2006, and we’re again in Lubbock in the interview room at the Vietnam Archive, and it’s about 9:20 am Central Standard time. Ron, let’s talk about some larger issues, some larger topics about the war in general, and then, of course, your personal experience with these topics. Could you discuss race relations and what you witnessed, saw, heard, during your time?

Ron Milam: My tour was really towards the end of the war, as you know, ’70 and ’71. The Army by that time was… in the field that I was in, there was a very high percentage of African Americans, and I guess the reason for that was because in the MACV units, you didn’t have—you had very few low ranking enlisted men. You had senior NCOs and junior officers were really what the teams were made up of, and as a result of that, we had a lot of career NCOs who were on their second and third tours in Vietnam. So for example, we had two MAT teams there at Phu Nhon and one district team, a total of approximately 15 personnel, and I believe over half were African American. On my team, we had personnel changes a couple of times during the year, but on my team, I remember, I would say 10 possible over the period that we were there, I think five were African American. And I don’t ever remember race being an issue there. I don’t remember racial issues ever coming up, and we had a couple of real redneck, white NCOs, but it wasn’t something that was ever discussed or ever a problem. It just wasn’t. I mean, some of the humorous things I remember about some of the NCOs being out drinking down at the Pleiku Air Base and calling and saying they’re on their way home, keep dinner for them, and then they’d get ambushed, and so we’d go out to help them with the ambush, and these were, you know, African American guys, and it wasn’t like, ‘Well, we don’t need to go save him because he’s black’ kind of thing. It just never came up. I don’t remember the issue at all. My research since then as a history professor and in some of my scholarship has indicated that the racial tension that existed in Vietnam was mostly in the Rear Echelons and not in the field units or not in the field with the field units. And I think there’s a big difference between those two things. The other
side of that is 1968, 1967, I lived through the Detroit Race Riot in 1967, and I saw a 50/50 campus in downtown Detroit, Michigan, so we have to remember that racial tension existed, and I would argue that there was less racial tension in the military than there was in society. Now, that’s easy for me to say because I’m white, but even among African Americans that you talk to at my age, the Army was an opportunity, and I have to say—and I may have said this earlier in my interview, I can’t recall, but the thing that I remember about the Army is in my training having almost always African American NCOs as my cadre. I remember it because—and these guys were re-upping. These guys were coming home from Vietnam with experience, and they were saying, ‘Hey, you know, it’s a lot better in here than it is out there,’ so as bad as it may have been, it was better than society in general because the opportunities were there. But I had good experiences with all my African American NCOs, and we had a major who was African American, so it just was not an issue with me.

RV: Along those lines, as far as officers, NCOs, enlisted, how would you describe the relationship between the men in your unit and just general, what you witnessed?

RM: In my unit, there was no rank to speak of. I mean, we respected the major because he was our boss, but I don’t remember respecting him because he was a major and I was just a lieutenant. We didn’t go by—we all went by first names. Even the NCOs, I think, called me—I had a nickname over there, nickname was Wally. It’s a long story, but it’s whatever reason.

RV: Do you want to go into that?

RM: No, not really, it comes from way back. But most of the time, I was not referred to—oh, they might call you ‘sir’ out of respect, and most of the time we didn’t wear rank. We had no rank on our uniforms. If we did, sometimes we’d wear the Vietnamese rank down here. We would wear our rank in Vietnamese signs on our shirt, rather than on the collars.

RV: And you’re pointing toward your—down towards your waist in the middle.

RM: Right, that’s kind of where they normally wear theirs, instead of wearing it up here. It wasn’t quite as visible. And it just wasn’t ever—rank was just not a big deal. I was a ranking officer over those NCOs, but if they had two tours in Vietnam and I didn’t, then I had to respect their knowledge, and they, you know, they respected me. I
RV: What about overall? What did you think about leadership and relationships?

RM: Well, that’s my dissertation or much of it, and I believe that there’s a myth that exists about the quality, the low quality of the junior officers and the higher quality of the field grades and the general grades. And I sort of reject that through my research. I think the Junior Officer Corps did all that could have been expected of them in the war for the kind of war that it was. I’m less excited about the field grade officers, in terms of my research mostly, more so than in my experience because I think that there was a huge mistake by the United States military with the six month tour of duty for—six month combat experience tour of duty. We were so over-officered in that war, and the Army wanted to get as many of them combat experience as possible that they pulled field grade officers out of line commands too early. Ostensibly, it was because of burnout and things like that, but nobody thought about burnout with privates and sergeants, so it’s pretty hard for me to accept that the reason they did it was because of burnout. They did it because they wanted to get as many officers combat experience as possible. That’s why I think they did it, and I think that was a mistake, a fatal mistake. General officers, well, these were the World War II guys, and I think too many of them thought that the war should be fought like World War II, including Westmoreland, so my attitude on the strategies of the war based on conventional warfare is that we fought it incorrectly in many cases, at least from the Army’s perspective. I have a little more respect for the way the Marines did it. I think the CAP team idea, which was put in very early in the war, was a solid idea, and I think it worked in many cases up north in I Corps. I think the MACV, the MAT team idea was a solid idea, but I think that we bred attitudes towards our allies by virtue of trying to fight independent of them in many cases, and that just fostered some of the racial stereotypes about the Vietnamese. If I had been in charge, I would have done it differently. Now would have I had known as 26-year-old man to do it differently? No. Looking back on it now I think we made some serious tactical mistakes, strategic and tactical mistakes.

RV: Well, I want to ask you about—we can jump to this other, you just broached about overall U.S. policy. I mean, this is something that we need to address and in two
different, well, three different contexts. One, in-country, two, when you got back, and three, now, looking backward as a historian.

RM: I accepted and still accept that the idea of going to war to preserve or to preserve democracy is a valid reason for going to war, if, if, with a great big if, the nation supports that idea. In a democracy, we elect our leaders, and then our leaders run our military, and if they say that this is a good idea, we’re going to stop communism at the 17th parallel, then I can accept that. Now, I also as a historian know that coming out of Geneva, coming out of 1954 after the fall of Dien Bien Phu, the United States, in my opinion, was given more of a diplomatic victory than we, the West, deserved after the fall of the French. There’s no reason that Vietnam should have been divided at the 17th parallel after the Vietnamese whipped up on the French. But it happened, probably because of the communists—the Chinese and the Russians not being able to get their act together and not really being very comfortable with a Ho Chi Minh-led, run government. So that was a gift, you know, a gift with quotation marks, that the United States got for having—after a victory run part of Vietnamese. And what we did with that victory wasn’t much because we anticipated that somehow or other in that ensuing two years before the election would be held in ‘56, which came out of the Accords. Then in those ensuing two years, Diem and his people would somehow or other be able to convince enough people that that was a better plan than Ho Chi Minh’s, in terms of running the government. And we—and they failed at that, and therefore, the elections were never held and away we go. So that’s kind of the political side as I see it. I think the early 60’s when we went in as advisors, I think we tried very hard to make that work, and if we had done a better job at it, we may have been able to prop up that Diem regime, but the Diem regime, in my opinion, was woefully lacking NPR, didn’t understand the agrarian economies, the need for the people to support the government. They thought they could strong-arm them, the whole thing with the Buddhists, with the Catholic president in a country that’s 90 percent Buddhist, that was a problem. And we got turned off very quickly to the Diem regime, we the United States, but we didn’t know what to do about it, so to speak. The answer of 1965, the answer of eventual escalation and the commitment of ground troops, I think, was a mistake. I don’t think there was any way to, with conventional warfare, based on where Vietnam, where South Vietnam was at the
time that we committed our troops and the attitudes that existed among the people in the
field. In the cities, it’d be different, but in the attitudes of people that existed in the field
towards the South Vietnamese government, I don’t think that a military solution was
possible at that time.

RV: Is this you looking back now?

RM: This is me looking back now, yes. At the time, I watched the Vietnam War
be fought, and I never—I don’t remember having a strong attitude one way or the other.
It was inevitable that if I had to go, I would go, but I don’t remember. I was not one that
said, ‘Gee whiz, I can’t wait to get there to stop communism.’ I didn’t feel that way
because it always was amazing to me that we would—and I still sort of feel this way—
that we would allow communism to exist 90 miles off the shore in Florida, but that we
were going to fight it 8,000 miles away. And so, I always had questioned. But I also, I
can also say that at the time, I couldn’t imagine a U.S. defeat; I couldn’t imagine a U.S.
defeat before I went, while I was there. It just didn’t make sense that we would ever not
win. I still remember thinking that Vietnam may end up just like Korea.

RV: In a truce?

RM: In a truce. And to this day, I wish it had because if it had just been a truce
and a successful one, then the outcome probably would at least be that South Vietnam
would be more like South Korea in terms of economic growth and success than it is as a
third world nation right now.

RV: You characterize the war, then, as a defeat?

RM: Yes. I characterize it as a defeat for this reason: we had a military mission.
The mission was to make sure that communism did not exist in South Vietnam. I’m not
sure we ever thought reunification was possible; maybe we did, but basically we wanted
to make sure that communism would not control South Vietnam. It not only controls
South Vietnam, it controls the whole country. I don’t know any other way to characterize
it.

RV: Okay.

RM: Now, we can talk about who to blame for that, but it’s still a defeat.
RV: Let’s hold that. We’ll come back to this topic. Let me revisit a couple of other topics in-country, and then we can move forward. Tell me about—did you ever witness, see, hear about homosexuality in Vietnam?

RM: No. No, I just didn’t see it, hear about it or anything else. Had a whole lot of real strong heterosexuals in my unit, and they spent a whole lot of time at the local brothels, and there were women around our camp all the time. I can’t remember if I told this story, but one—no, I don’t think I did—one of the humorous things that went on was Christmas day of 1970 as I was getting ready to go on R&R. On Christmas day, the local chief of police presented to us, the advisors, as a Christmas present, a whole Lambretta full of prostitutes, and not participating in that sort of thing, I remember I was spending kind of downtime Christmas day, I remember spending some time up on the top of my bunker with my music tapes that had been sent to me for Christmas. And I think, as I said, I wasn’t as sad for Christmas as I would have been otherwise because I knew I was going to see my wife in 25 days, but I remember laying up there listening to music and laying in the sun, so to speak, enjoying that music, and then going down, taking a shower. And in the shower were six prostitutes, the gift of the chief of police.

RV: (laughs)

RM: So, it was a very common thing for our guys to take advantage of the prostitutes in Pleiku, and actually, they even went on road trips sometimes. The prostitutes would come up from Pleiku to My Thach, which was kind of the local beer joint that we went to. It was about six klicks away, I believe, and the guys would be up there for much of the day, particularly on weekends and stuff. So that happened a lot, but homosexuality, no, just never was an issue.

RV: Do you remember that scene in *Full Metal Jacket* and the second half of it where they’re in Hue post-Battle of Hue, and the prostitute comes after the battle, and they’re all lined up, and they’re kind of bidding, or she’s choosing?

RM: Pretty realistic.

RV: Yeah?

RM: Yeah. Saw it all the time. Saigon, everywhere I went, prostitutes were around, and yes, men did sell their sisters into—and young, my goodness, very, very young. But yeah, it happened all the time.
RV: You mentioned music, and I wanted to ask you about that. What music was part of your life there? What songs take you back to Vietnam?

RM: Well, and I think I mentioned this a little bit in my—about my basic training and stuff, but being from Detroit, Michigan, I was a big fan of the Motown sound, even though I’m white. In my unit, we had this combination of African Americans who were really into the Motown sound, and these rednecks who were really into, at that time, the big music was Dolly Parton and Porter Wagner, and she was like 18 years old. And so we always had this battle between—and everybody had a stereo system. Everybody had gone into their PACX catalogue and ordered really expensive stuff, some like we have there. The big 8-tracks and cassettes, and so that was the thing you did. I had a terrific sound system in my hooch, and so it was a matter of how loud you could play your music to blast out the guy next to you and make sure your Motown sound was louder than his country music.

RV: So it was a battle between Smokey Robinson and Dolly Parton?

RM: Oh, yeah, absolutely. And I was always more with the Smokey Robinson guys, you know, I do, you know, I like country music probably no more now than I did then, but being raised that in Oklahoma, I sort have always been around that kind of music. But rock ‘n’ roll, heavy metal, I was very much into heavy metal. Led Zeppelin was really coming in. I think I may have mentioned the name of our war wagon was Lead Zeppelin, L-E-A-D, and we had it painted, and we would put these big speakers on this deuce and a half and blast this great Led Zeppelin music over the speakers and drive down the highway.

RV: Highway 14?

RM: Highway 14. So we listened to all that stuff. I was very much into heavy metal. In fact, to this day, I still like the heavy metal sounds from Vietnam; it still rings with me, even though as an older person, I guess I’m not supposed to like it anymore. But that’s Vietnam for me, is that kind of music. There are certain songs, Creedance Clearwater and all of that music that has become associated with all the film that has come from Vietnam, and I still like all that music. Classic rock ‘n’ roll is still my music as a result, I think, and I say that because my wife and I don’t agree on that music because I was exposed to it in Vietnam, and she wasn’t back here. She was still exposed.
to the Motown sound and the country music, and it was only me that was exposed to the heavy metal, so I still like that kind of music.

RV: Any songs in Motown sounds, anything, or artists that you really particularly cared for?

RM: Marvin Gaye, and I even liked some of the so-called ‘anti-war music’ which was most of the music, but particular songs, you know, *We Gotta Get Out of this Place* which was Eric Burdon, I believe, and The Animals.

RV: The Animals, yes.

RM: That was very popular, and *Last Night I Went to Sleep in Detroit City, I Wanna Go Home*, that was the one that was so funny because that was the one that usually every Filipino cover group sang that song at the end of the show. That was the way they wrapped it up, *I Wanna Go Home, Last Night I Went to Sleep in Detroit City*.

And of course, being from Detroit, that, you know, had resonated more so with me. The Rolling Stones, man, I absolutely loved all the Rolling Stones music, much more so than the Beatles, so all of the *Gimme Shelter* and all that stuff really hits home with me.

RV: Did you listen to the Beatles?

RM: See, the Beatles—

RV: They broke up right before you—

RM: They broke up in March of 1970, the *Let It Be* album came out, as I recall, and I went over in May of ’70, and so I remember while I was at El Paso in language school, I remember it—them breaking up. And after they broke up, I was less interested. It was sort of like, ‘Well, they’re not around anymore; this is all history now,’ so I lost some interest. I liked some of the early Beatles, and then I sort of lost interest. I was always more of a Rolling Stone fan. That music, they’re still the best rock ‘n’ roll band, to me, of all time, so I was less of a Beatles fan. And then I liked Creedance Clearwater Revival, like I say, Led Zeppelin, and then, you know, some of the folk music that was sort of on the anti-war side, I listened to that. There was always something sort of neat to me that you could be in a war and listen to people sing anti-war songs. That was just something ironic about that, you know, so we found ourselves doing stuff like that, too, I think. Music was very much a part of my life over there.

RV: Did it help you pass the time?
RM: Yes, oh, absolutely. One thing I used to do is I had a cassette player, pretty
good size one that I had bought on the black market, and what we would do there with
both weapons, same thing. We’d buy weapons when we got there from somebody that
was leaving, and then when you left, you’d sell it to the next guy coming in. I sold my
Smith & Wesson, and I sold my CAR-15, and then I told my—actually, I gave my
cassette player to my interpreter. We would listen to music, American music, and sing
with my interpreter, and that was one of the ways of him improving on his diction and
stuff. So I can remember singing. I had a cassette of Simon and Garfunkel, and I can
remember singing *Bridge Over Troubled Water*, and his favorite was *The Boxer*, and we
would go on and on with *The Boxer*, and we’d sing it in harmony, and one of us would be
Simon and one would be Garfunkel, and that was fun. Those are fond memories. I
brought a lot of those tapes home with me, and they’re all just caked within red clay of
Phu Nhon, but yeah, music was a major part of my life in Vietnam and still is with the
memories.

RV: Besides music, what else did you all do for entertainment, and besides
prostitutions of your unit. Not you, but your guys.

RM: We used to get film from Saigon. When they brought the mail in, there
would always be two or three or four films, 16 mm films, and we had a projector. And so
we would get the films, and when anyone went to Saigon, we were sort of on a rotating
schedule of other MACV units. There was a unit up at Plei Me and another one down at
Ban Me Thuot, and the choppers would sort of make that run, and depending on where
you were in that run is when you would get the film. And if it was really good film, if it
was R-rated stuff, this was right about the period between when film went from mature
Ms to hard Rs; you could actually see some skin, and those, of course, were the most
popular films. And so depending on where you were in the schedule, you would get
these films that had been run over and over and over and over and all the sex scenes were
not exactly cut out intentionally, and they weren’t censored, it was just that they’d been
seen so many times, by the time they got to you, the project would break (imitates
projector). The film would kind of break, you know, and it’s, ‘Oh, no! That’s the good
part!’ So we would tell the guys when they’d go on leave or they’d go down to Saigon to
bring some film back with them; we’d want to see it first. And *Patton* was a popular film
at that time, I remember, but mostly you wanted film that had some sex in it. That was
the goal. We also used to get the Sunday NFL games.

RV: On film?

RM: On film. NFL films put together with that wonderful voice.

RV: Yes, of Pasetta, Pasatta.

RM: And we would get those, like the games would be played on Sunday, and
sometimes we would have those films by Saturday, the following Saturday, and
sometimes, we didn’t know who’d won. I mean, depending on the Stars and Stripes and
how it had gotten there, well then this became kind of a game. They guys would bet the
games, and you always wondered, you know, if they guys had come in from Saigon or if
they’d—there was no e-mail back then and no one had any phones to call home, but we’d
bet the games. And you always worried that somebody had found out who had won
those games, and that was kind of the big thing was did you want to make a bet with
somebody and worry whether he knew the end result because somehow or other, he’d
gotten the letter that he’d got before the film had gotten there about the game. And my
father used to also tape the Lions. We lived in Detroit, and my father would tape the
Lions games on cassette tapes and send them to me, and I’d listen to the games on the
radio. We read mail; mail was the most important thing in your life. We played poker.
Gosh, we played a lot of poker, almost every night, and they were big money games
because you didn’t have anything else to spend money on. And we always took a siesta
in the afternoon; we always took a nap between 12 and 2, and then we didn’t work nights
other than going out on ambush and stuff like that. We read dirty magazines. The PX
stocked, and I don’t mean Penthouse and Playboy, which they also stocked, but they
stocked a lot of other dirty magazines, men’s magazines, in the Pxes in Pleiku. And so
everybody would go and when you made a run to Pleiku, you’d pick up all the new dirty
magazines, and then you’d bring them back and distribute them among the guys. By the
time about a week had gone on, they were pretty dog-eared, and so we did that. That’s
about it.

RV: What role did humor play during your tour?

RM: Well, you tried to keep a lighthearted attitude about everything, and in our
unit, fortunately, with only one death in the tour, in my entire tour, and I don’t know that
there was any right before me, and I don’t know about after, we were fortunate to not
have had guys getting shot up all the time. So, it was easy for us to try to maintain some
lightheartedness, but we saw so much death among the Vietnamese and the Montagnards,
not only battle deaths, but deaths from spinal meningitis in the villages, just poverty, it
was a really sad situation in that way. But because we weren’t experiencing it ourselves,
we weren’t losing each other, it was a little bit of a standoffishness in that you were
observing death and you were observing a more—you were sort of participating in it on
the edges, as opposed to worrying everyday that one of your men was going to die. That
wasn’t a frequent thought that we had until the very end of my tour, at least, when we
went through the Battle of Phu Nhon. But up until that time, we could maintain a much
more—much more levity, I think, as a result of it not being a constant throw-it-in-your-
face thing about death.

RV: So you all would do practical jokes or just kind of have more of a jovial
attitude versus a negative attitude?
RM: Yes, yes. It was a good place to be if you had to be in Vietnam kind of
thing, I believe.
RV: Tell me a little bit about fear, and what role did fear play for you during your
tour and then, perhaps, overall fear in war, fear in combat, then and looking back now.
RM: I think at the time, I thought I was—probably up until the Battle of Phu
Nhon, I think I believe that I was invincible because I had had so many close calls that
I’ve told you about. B40s hitting trees, B40s hitting jeeps and not exploding, landmines,
Lambrettas hitting landmines right before we got there. You get the feeling after awhile
that you are invincible, and I was young, so I don’t ever remember thinking that this was
my last day until March 15th, ’71, and then I had some real concerns because now I knew
the big boys, the big units were in the area. I always felt like I could always take care of
the VC. I thought they were probably kind of like me, didn’t really want to be there, and
if we ever had to face them down, then we would win kind of thing. Never worried about
it when I was out with my units, ambush patrols and things like that, I thought we always
had the upper hand. That changed on March 15th because now I knew the big boys were
in the area with big weaponry and with motivated and well trained troops, and so I
worried that last six weeks as I’ve described. I think it was a—so that’s kind of—my tour
is sort of a nine month and a three month in that sense, in terms of fear. As I look back
on it and as I run my life now, I don’t have a lot of fear in my life. I live on the edge in a
lot of respects. I ride motorcycles, and I ride without a helmet. There’s just hardly
anything in life that I’m scared of, and I don’t know if that’s a result of Vietnam. I’m a
little bit of a hypochondriac in a sense, you know, I have fears about early death and
things like that, but I don’t let it affect the way I live, and my wife seems to think maybe
that is a result of Vietnam because she remembers me before. There’s just hardly
anything that scares me or bothers me in that sense, so that may be a product of combat
experiences.

RV: Were drugs and alcohol an issue?

RM: Yes. We had frequent—we had a couple of men in our unit who used grass
all the time, I mean, that was their drug of choice, and so in the evenings when they
weren’t on guard duty, they smoked marijuana. We had other, almost all of the NCOs, I
would classify as alcoholics, that is, they waited until dinner was over, and then they
drank, and then they drank, and then they drank themselves to sleep, and they did that for
a year. My own situation over there was different. I very seldom drank a beer even. We
had ration cards, and we were allowed to get, I think, one case of beer a month for each
soldier and six bottles of Jack Daniels or something, and I usually would trade my ration
cards or trade—we’d pool them and go in with some guys, and I became, literally became
addicted to Pepsi-Cola. Caffeine, caffeinated Pepsi-Cola. I probably drank 15 Cokes a
day, not Cokes, Pepsi. Had to be Pepsi, and it was easy to get, and it was wonderful, and
I drank it instead of water, and I drank it at all meals, including breakfast, and I drank it
all day, and we carried a cooler in the back of jeep or a cooler—we carried—it was a
sandbag full of ice, and you threw your Pepsis in there, and wherever you were, you
popped a Pepsi. That was the way I lived for a solid year.

RV: I’ve never heard of that before.

RM: Oh, yeah. They were wonderful, and even to this day, I don’t drink Coca-
Cola, I drink Pepsis, but I can’t drink caffeinated anything. I’m almost allergic to
caffeine now, and I don’t know whether that had anything to do with it, but that’s what I
did. I drank caffeinated cokes for one solid year. And I remember coming home and
reading *Playboy* magazine and reading that Hugh Hefner was addicted to Pepsis or
something, and he drank like 10 a day or 15 a day, and I thought, ‘What’s wrong with
that? That’s no big deal.’ But I stopped when I came home; it wasn’t the same, but
that’s what I did, I mean, that was my drug of choice. And I was kind of conscious of not
getting drunk unless I knew it was a good time to be drunk. That wasn’t very often
because I always felt like there just might be a need for someone to be sober. Now, we
didn’t have drug problems, again, during the day. The guys that did grass did it at night.
The guys that did alcohol did it at night, so that wasn’t as much a problem, but it was
amazing to me, my NCOs, my senior NCOs, who were probably in their early 40s, it was
amazing to me how much they could drink and not fall over. I mean, I would watch these
poker games where they would just, you know, drink a bottle of Jack Daniels and still be
functioning.

RV: In one sitting?

RM: Yeah, yeah. Amazing. But I just sort of felt like somebody had to be sober,
and so I didn’t really drink that much myself. But there were occasions, Christmas and
Thanksgiving and holidays and stuff, if you felt like you were reasonably secure, I might
say, ‘Well, today I’m going to get drunk,’ and I would, and I would drink Jack Daniels.
That was my drug of choice in that case. I didn’t use grass while I was there, mostly
because I was never real confident that—and I had experimented before and after, but I
wasn’t real confident that what I was getting wouldn’t kill me because, you know, you
went down to the village, and you bought it, and we didn’t exactly have baggies, but it
was sort of like these little Saran Wrap things that it was in. And the guys would bring it
back; it wasn’t very expensive, but I thought to myself, ‘Man, if I was a VC wanting to
kill me, there’s all kinds of way to do it with this stuff.’ And I wasn’t a smoker exactly,
and my wife used to send me cigars. There was a particular cigar, small cigar, that I liked
to smoke, five to a pack, and they weren’t Carrillo’s, I believe they were called, and I just
really liked those. And so that was about the only thing I smoked, and I didn’t smoke a
lot of those. But I was a little scared of the marijuana; I just didn’t really know that
someone wouldn’t have laced it, so I chose to not do that. I don’t remember having a
particular feeling about it, wrongness of one over the other. I thought marijuana was no
worse in terms of it affecting someone’s ability to function, that it would be any worse
than alcohol. I do remember one night one of my sergeants, we were hit with mortars,
which happened a lot, and we all went to the bunkers, and I went up to my elevated
bunker, and my sergeant was with me, and he had been smoking grass, and he started
firing, I said, ‘Pop a flare,’ and M79 flare, and he popped a CS gas grenade, and I just
crushed his ass out. And I thought to myself, ‘Well, that’s what happens when you
smoke marijuana at seven o’clock at night, and you get hit at nine,’ but normally we
didn’t get hit until midnight, and he probably wouldn’t have gotten out of bed. So you
can make mistakes when you’re on—but you can make mistakes on alcohol, too, so to
me, they were no different in terms of the ability to function. Actually, the guys that
smoked grass were probably less hung over the next morning than the guys that were
doing drugs or were doing alcohol, but I don’t remember having a strong feeling that one
was necessarily any worse than the other.

RV: Did y’all have any pets?
RM: Yeah, we had dogs around there, but I remember one in particular when I got
there, and I may have told this story, too, that they had a pet monkey, and the monkey—
this was the first day I was there, and the guy I was replacing said the monkey had gotten
way out of hand, and he wanted to kill the monkey. He went out, took me out there at the
end of the runway and shot the monkey. I thought, ‘Geez, that was a mean thing to do,’
but that’s the only big pet like that that we had.

RV: Shoot the monkey with a pistol or an M16?
RM: No, he shot it with an M1 Carbine, which I bought from him when he left
and sawed the stock off and had just a pistol grip on it. It was one of my lap guns.

RV: Any other pets?
RM: No.

RV: Okay. What about wild animals? What did you run across out there in the
bush?
RM: We ran across a leopard. I think I told the story of killing the leopard on a
night ambush. We ran across a lot of snakes. My favorite snake story, and I have this on
film; it was so wild. We went into a village, and these kids were chasing a cobra through
the village with sticks, and I mean little kids, three and four year old kids chasing this
thing. And it crawled up, and it was coming towards us. We parked our jeep, and it
came over, and it crawled up underneath the jeep and wound itself around the drive shaft.
And so, you know, we all big brave soldiers that we were, everybody got our their M45s or 38s or M16s out, you know, and then I pulled a smoke grenade and popped purple smoke. ‘Smoke out!’ Popped this purple smoke grenade up underneath the jeep, and before we could get a shot off, one of those little four year old kids with a stick beat that sucker on the top of the head and took off with it.

RV: Wow, that’s amazing. How big was this cobra?
RM: Oh, it was about six feet. It was maybe five, six feet. Pretty good size.
RV: So, out in the bushes you ran across—
RM: Ran across snakes a lot, ran across huge spiders and ants. I’m trying to think. The bamboo viper was the real dangerous one, but I don’t remember ever running across one of those. I mean, I heard about them, but I don’t think I ever saw one. Saw the cobras.

RV: Out in the bush you saw the cobras?
RM: Yeah, I say that. I’m not a snake expert, so for me, every snake after that one in the village was a cobra. Probably wasn’t. Rats. Had this new NCO who was our medic, came in the latter part of—must have been February because it was before the Phu Nhơn incident, and we were out on an operation, and there was some bunkers around this village, and we decided to spend the night down in the village. So, I went down in the bunker, and this NCO, I was sitting there, and I don’t even know. I didn’t have my pot on because I didn’t carry my pot around, but I had a hat on or something, and I remember my NCO looking over at me, this new NCO, and he said, ‘Sir,’ he says, ‘You got a rat on your head.’

RV: (laughs)
RM: And apparently, I kind of shook my head, and it was a huge rat, I mean, it was almost too big to be a rat. I thought, ‘Well, thanks for getting excited,’ you know.
RV: Why is the rat on your head?
RM: I don’t know, I think it ran down from something and then just sat there, and I couldn’t feel it because I guess, I don’t know. So we saw a lot of rats and stuff like that. In fact, we had contests in our hooch, also some stuff that I filmed, to see who could kill the biggest rat inside our hooch without killing each other. That was a challenge because there weren’t traps big enough to kill these rats. There wasn’t a mousetrap.
RV: What size were these rats?
RM: Oh, probably a good size one would be about maybe nine inches long, varying sizes, but you could win, and it was a weekly contest. You could win with one about that big.
RV: You’re holding your hands about 9, 10 inches.
RM: Yeah, yeah, but you had to kill it without shooting it with a rifle because we were living next door to each other. So we invented different ways to kill these rats, and I remember what I used to do was I had a—I would take like a .38 round and take the shell off and then put buckshot down in it and put wax on top of it. You couldn’t really aim with it, but you could wax the powder and wax the shot inside, and then I could lay there, and these rats would run right across the top, like my hooch was, I don’t know, five by eight or six by eight or something like that. And so as they’d run across the rafters or even lower than that, sometimes they’d get down even lower, I could just roll over and take my .38 and pop one of these shot rounds into it (imitates shot). And then the next morning at breakfast, we’d all come out with our rats that we had shot that night or clubbed or whatever, and then we’d hold them up for the camera and everything, and we’d award…. That was kind of a little fun thing.
RV: That’s very interesting. Okay, shifting gears to a couple of different topics. Agent Orange, were you ever exposed to it, did you hear about this, were you aware, any of your men?
RM: I was not aware of Agent Orange while I was in Vietnam ever. Never heard the word, didn’t know about spraying. When I came home, about five years later, they started sending out these inquires from, I guess from DoD asking about exposure to things and how I’d been feeling and stuff like that. I don’t remember responding that I knew anything about it; I think I just blew it off. Maybe I didn’t even answer it. When I went back to Vietnam in 2001 and went to the War Remnants Museum in Saigon, they have this map of the countryside where they say was most—where the defoliation was most prevalent, and it was right smack where I lived. They showed either side of Highway 14 down almost to Cu Chi as being a heavy Agent Orange area. I don’t remember seeing the defoliate used, so it either happened before I was there or after.
RV: Was there actual defoliation in your area?
RM: Well, I don’t remember that as a project.
RV: Could you tell it had been defoliated at some point in the past?
RM: No, I can’t say that I did know that. I guess I have some concerns about it now, but the medical problems that I have in my life are—I don’t think things that so far I can pin on that, so I’m not sure that I’m exposed to it or was exposed to it in any great degree, but I guess it’s sort of one of those things that’s sort of out there that I always wondered, most so because when I went back and saw that map. But I don’t remember anything about it while I was there, and I don’t remember when I came home being overly concerned about it.
RV: Has Maxine brought it up?
RM: Yeah, I think it may have had something to do with I had, when I was in the hospital in Pleiku for those weeks or days, I think I was there seven days or something, I forget now, with malaria or with FUO- fever of unknown origin, and it was later diagnosed as scrub typhus, and when I came back, I think for four or five years we were told not to give blood if we had been in Vietnam, so I didn’t. And then I think one thing started working with another, and I think we made a conscious decision, and it may have just been the hype of Agent Orange and everything, but we made a conscious decision to not have any more children, and we decided to just have the one child who was very healthy and to not ever have to be concerned about that. In retrospect, that may have been overreacting to the fears of what I may have been exposed to, so we don’t know whether that’s a pass on or that will not be a factor of a pass on with my son. But my health has not, I think other than my ears, I don’t think my health was particularly affected by Vietnam, at least my physical health.
RV: What about your spiritual development before, during, after, and after was it affected by your experience and what did you see in general as far as spiritual aspects?
RM: There are no atheists in foxholes.
RV: Right, that stereotype, that cliché.
RM: Yeah, yeah. I have never been a particularly religious person. I mean, I’m a Christian, and I believe in God and that sort of thing, but I always have been more of a believer that Christianity and religion in general fulfills a social need. And in Vietnam, it
did provide that in a psychological need, but I don’t remember spending a whole lot of
time praying while I was there. I think I probably spent more time reacting than praying.

RV: What do you mean?
RM: I mean while you’re praying, you’re not doing something else if the shit hits
the fan, so it always seemed to me that the God that I believed in had enough things on
his plate that he wasn’t going to necessarily need my words in order to react to what I
needed at that moment, so I was never one to use whatever time I had to get myself out of
that mess to be talking to somebody that probably, maybe could help me out, but not as
much as I could there on the ground kind of thing. So I just never really got into that.

RV: Were there church facilities there?
RM: No, we didn’t even have a chapel; we didn’t have anything like that. Closest
thing to church we had was there was sort of a Baptist church in one of the villages, but it
was just they had church on Sunday mornings, but we never went. And I may have told
the story that the major tried to get us to go to church on Christmas Eve at the Baptist
church down in the village, and none of us would go unless we could wear our weapons,
and he wouldn’t let us go with our weapons, so we didn’t go. It was not—I didn’t go to
chapel, I didn’t even talk to a chaplain for the whole year I was there. I’m sure the
chaplains provided important service to the American units, and I have some friends who
were chaplains, and I think they do terrific work, but it wasn’t something that I felt
necessarily in need for.

RV: Did your Vietnam experience affect your spirituality post-war?
RM: I don’t think so. I go to church. My involvement with church is before
Vietnam and after Vietnam has always been at my convenience. I’ve never felt a need to
go. I don’t believe that Christianity requires witnessing. I think it’s a private matter, and
I go to church because I enjoy it, and my wife and I have been involved in music, and so
we’ve always participated in choirs, and I’ve always been a soloist at church. And so we
do that even today, but we don’t have a church in Lubbock, but we have a church in our
cabin in Angel Fire that we go all the time. So the church has been important in our life,
but it’s not a driver, so to speak.

RV: What about the concept and the practice of bravery in war and in combat and
the situation of simply living day to day in a war zone?
RM: I think that people in combat, men and women now, but my experience with men is that those that have strength of character outside of combat have it in combat, too. I saw bravery exhibited not just by Americans, but by Montagnards, by ARVN, by Viet Cong, by villagers in bad situations, and in my opinion, you react to the moment because you are the kind of person that you are, and my guess is that when we do studies of people who really exhibited bravery, we could have found and predicted that they would be fine in combat. Combat is—there are so many things that can go right and wrong in that short seconds that’s usually involved. When one makes the decision to storm the machine gun or to go out after a buddy or something like that, they’re not doing it because of any thoughts about being brave; they’re doing it because at the moment, there is something driving them to take action because they’re either—it’s not a matter of saying, ‘I’m going to go save his life,’ as much as you see your buddy in danger, and you can’t imagine not taking care of him. You talk to most Medal of Honor winners after it’s all over, they can’t tell you exactly why they did it, but it’s more a matter of, ‘Well, why wouldn’t I?’ It’s kind of a silly question, ‘Why would I not let my buddy lay out there, or why wouldn’t I try to take out the one automatic weapon that’s keeping us all pinned down?’ That just makes sense to me; that’s why I did it. So I don’t think that there’s anything spectacular about being brave. I think it’s just people that have character reacting at him because the opportunity presented itself at that moment. It doesn’t blow me away so to speak. I mean, I’m in awe of people who have done it, but it doesn’t, when I think of through the circumstances, I say, ‘Yeah, but you know, the reason that you’re a good guy now is because you were a good guy before and for those few moments, you exhibited something special because of the character that you have.’ That’s usually what I think is the case.

RV: Did you consider yourself brave in Vietnam? I doubt you consciously thought about that then, but looking back.

RM: No, I considered myself to have been in a situation that required me to be levelheaded, to keep my team alive and to make good decisions when I had to, to keep myself alive because of my obligation to my wife and son, and I did it. It’s pretty much that simple. I don’t consider myself brave, or I don’t consider myself to be a hero or
anything like that. I just consider it to have been what I was asked to do by my
government, so I went and did it, and then I came home.

RV: Tell me about Vietnam the country. How did you see it then and how do you
see it now? I mean, you went back, but just what about the culture, the people, physical
geography.

RM: I think when I first went there, I was amazed at how beautiful the country
was, and I still feel that way. Nha Trang is one of the most beautiful places I have ever
been. When I got home, I think I didn’t ever want to have anything to do with Vietnam
or Vietnamese people again, and that was the reaction from having been there and not
having anyone care about whether I went or not. I think it was just sort of this shove it
away thing. When it fell in ’75, I remember feeling just terrible, and I think part of it was
because of my own situation, but I also felt bad for the Vietnamese people because I
thought there would be a blood bath, and so I felt bad for those that I had worked with
and fought with.

RV: Did you watch that on TV as it unfolded?

RM: Yes. I don’t know that I have ever felt worse about anything. I’ve been very
fortunate in my family that we’ve never had untimely deaths in our family. We’ve been
very fortunate, and so for me, being sad over things like that have never been part of my
life, other than my good friend Ed. But when Vietnam fell, South Vietnam fell in March
31st, April, whatever it was.

RV: April.

RM: April of ’75, I remember watching it on television, and I remember President
Ford giving, you know, lip service to helping them out. I just felt horrible. I don’t know
that anything has ever hit me that hard, and part of it was just because, ‘Well, what the
hell did I do?’ And you know, we didn’t talk about it being a defeat at that time. No one
did, I mean, not no one. I’m sure Gabriel Kolko, Bob Buzzanco did, but the media didn’t
say, ‘America lost a war.’ We said, ‘South Vietnamese lost their war.’ It wasn’t until
upon reflection and study later on that we decided that we lost it also.

RV: We were out in ’73.
RM: And we had been out for two years. As the helmet sticker on my biker buddy says, ‘We were winning when I left.’ But it just tore me up because it meant that it was all in vain. It really did mean that.

RV: Did you think about Ed?

RM: Yeah, yeah I did.

RV: Was part of the catalyst for—

RM: I think I thought about Ed at that moment, and then I think I put it away, and I don’t think I resurrected it for the next seven years, until the wall went up. And I think that’s what a lot of veterans did. It would be an interesting study to see a group of veterans and how they reacted to the war in Vietnam between the end of their tour of duty and 1975 and then see what happens between ’75 and ’82 because my guess is what we would find is that there were more guys willing to talk about their service until ’75, but then it became, ‘Yeah, I did it, and we lost, and now I don’t want to talk about it.’ I can’t say that for sure, but that would be my guess.

RV: What about the U.S. withdrawal? Did you follow that?

RM: The ’73? Yeah, and I thought it was time, but I also thought we had left them in better shape. I knew I’d left my guys in good shape. I knew that my district was very pacified. I knew that my district—I felt confident that my district would hold off the NVA when they came in, and guess what? My district was the first to fall. The Central Highlands between Ban Me Thuot and Pleiku was the first to fall. That shocked me. They started naming those places I knew all about that were falling. I couldn’t believe it.

RV: How’d that strike you?

RM: I couldn’t believe it. I mean, it struck me that, gee whiz, these people didn’t show any of that. They showed toughness, they showed—not that I ever believed that they knew what communism was, but they showed toughness against the enemy. I’d left them all those weapons.

RV: Did they know what democracy was?

RM: No, I don’t think so. I think that what they knew—see, the Montagnards were such great people and such good friends of Americans. They loved us. They exhibited great respect for us, the ones that I worked with, but I don’t think they knew. I think they liked us because we were rich, and we gave them stuff.
RV: The Montagnards?

RM: Yeah, yeah, and we were kind to them, and we helped them, and we came into the village, and we inoculated them when there was the spinal meningitis epidemic, and we gave them food, and we gave them candy, and we trained them, and we did things that looked to them like we were better than the Vietnamese towards them. And I think they liked us better than they liked the ARVN.

RV: Wasn’t that part of the point of the Hearts and Minds, you know, just to secure these people and help them as much as possible?

RM: And I think that American soldiers in Montagnard places most of the time did a good job of that, but I think in other areas, we probably exhibited, the American units may have exhibited hatred and racial attitudes that the Vietnamese picked up on also. I’ve asked myself this question a lot, and I may try to do some research on it later on, as why did Americans respond to Montagnards the way we did, and why did we respond to Vietnamese the way we did? They were two different attitudes. We appeared to love the Montagnards; it was almost like the Montagnards were the Native Americans of Vietnam, and we saw ourselves as being the protectors of them, perhaps, even against our South Vietnamese allies. And they picked up on it, and there was a real bond between Americans and Montagnards that I didn’t see exhibited as much between Americans and Vietnamese.

RV: You said there appeared to be this special relationship, and then you said it was there, and they bought into, and you also said they liked us because of the stuff they gave them. Is all that kind of intermingled?

RM: I think so. I think we gave to them because we thought they were appreciative, and from what I hear from other guys that maybe were down in the Delta and places that were more like Vietnamese villages, I don’t hear them talking about that as much as we did up in the Highlands. And when I went back, I found myself really attracted to the Montagnards. We went back into those Central Highland villages at Dak Lak and Ban Me Thuot and Phu Nhon and My Thach and all those villages, and I really like those people. And the funny thing is, my wife, I mean, she’s glad she went back to Vietnam with me, but she didn’t have the same feeling.

RV: Back? She’d been before?
RM: No, no, when she went back with me, she didn’t have the feeling that I had, and she probably doesn’t need to go back to Vietnam in her lifetime she says. It’s not that she doesn’t like the people, but it’s just such a foreign country to her. To me, I was very comfortable when I went back, even though it was, you know, the third world nation part of it, and you know, I’ve traveled all over the world, but I still like it over there.

RV: Why did you decide to go back? And you went back and filmed and really had a full experience.

RM: Yeah, you know, that’s a very good question, and I don’t have a simple answer. I was in school. I had been studying the Vietnam War for two years, and we had never thought of going back, and I don’t remember what the challenge was exactly, but somebody in my academic world challenged me to go back, and I don’t remember exactly how or why.

RV: The professor or a student?

RM: Yeah, it was a professor, and it may have been Dr. Joe Glatthaar who was an advisor to me, teaches at UNC. He said he was going back to Vietnam in the summer, he and his soon-to-be wife, and I think I thought, ‘Whoa, that’s kind of neat, maybe I’ll look into that.’ And then he ended up not going, and then Maxine and I, by that time, had put the trip together, and we had looked into going with veterans and doing this sort of thing, and then we decided that we didn’t want to do that, that we wanted to go by ourselves. And so we put the trip together through an agency. There was a lot of people going to Vietnam from Houston in the oil and gas business. We had friends that had actually lived in Vung Tau and places on the coast that were involved in the business. But I didn’t want to go to those places, so we went to a travel agent there in Houston that had done these types of trips, and when I told them what I wanted to do, they didn’t know how to do that. They did have contacts in Vietnam that could get us to the places that we wanted to go, so we kind of ended up shopping travel agents until we found somebody that would put one together. And they said, ‘And you’re sure you want to go by yourselves?’ No tour, I didn’t want a tour because I’d looked into those, these big fancy tours with 16 people. I said, ‘No, we just want a guide everywhere we go,’ so we ended up going and being handed off from guide to guide to guide in the various places that we went. But it was just the two of us. That was a little scary; it was a real scary riding through the
countryside of Vietnam at night, places that I’d fought in, and I’m riding in a vehicle with
two Vietnamese at night.

RV: Was Maxine scared?
RM: I don’t think so. She’s a pretty confident lady, and I think she just figured
that if I thought it was okay, then it must be, but I was really scared.

RV: Did you tell her you were scared?
RM: The next day after we did that. Two nights I think we rode at night in the
car, and I was a little bit scared, a little scared. We’d been in some villages that night and
ridden some elephants and stuff, and I ended up going back to the hotel, and then when
we got in the hotel, I didn’t sleep real well in the hotels and village in the Pleiku and Ban
Me Thuot areas because, you know, I had been there before under different
circumstances. People all looked the same; there was no economic improvement. It was
really depressing in that sense, but the people were all smiling and happy, so I guess
that’s all that counts.

RV: I was asking about Maxine’s, you know, fear or a lack thereof not to question
her fortitude, but really it appears there was a pretty significant difference between,
obviously, what you were experiencing and what she was experiencing having never
been and never had your experience, and there you are doing things that you would never
have done while the last time you were in that country, and it came back, not in a
necessarily horrible way, but it came back to you as kind of protective mechanisms,
defensive mechanisms.

RM: She was surprised at my response when we first flew into the country. I
really—when we first came into the airspace, and they come on the air, and they tell you
that—is it, put the windows down or what was the rule there? We landed at Tan Son
Nhut, and we had to go right through into the terminal, and there was no one there to
greet us. It was scary, and I was a little bit—I think she could tell that I was a little tense.

RV: On the plane or once you got—
RM: Both, both. As soon as they said, ‘We have entered Vietnam airspace.’ It
was strange. It was really strange.

RV: What were you feeling?
RM: I think I started questioning whether I should have done this, first of all, whether this was a good idea, and I’m not sure that that went away until after our guide had picked us up because the processing part was kind of scary. I didn’t know what questions they’d be asking me, and then they went through my passport and everything because my travel agent knew that I was a veteran, and I didn’t know how much of that information had been transmitted to my people. Well, all of it had because my guides knew even the units I had served in.

RV: Wow.

RM: It was pretty wild. And then when we got up into the Highlands, our guides were great in Saigon, and then they handed me off to a guide up in Ban Me Thuot that was less excited to have me as a customer and told me that they wouldn’t take me to Phu Nhon, and I had a big fight with my guide over that. Showed my itinerary and told him we had paid for this, he still wouldn’t take us. Said that his government had—Phu Nhon was off-limits, and they couldn’t go there. And so we had a big argument about that and went and stayed on his itinerary for the evening and went to the village and that sort of thing. And then the next morning, we were to drive to Pleiku, and he told me he didn’t even know where Phu Nhon was, and so I just let him sort of sit there, and then as soon as we drive up, I was telling Maxine everywhere that we were going. As we went through these villages, I knew them all, and then as soon as we got to Phu Nhon, I grabbed my driver, put my hands on his shoulders, shook him, and I said, ‘Stop the car!’ And he did, and I jumped out, and Maxine jumped out with me, and we started photographing and videoing everything. And I felt kind of bad about that, but I wasn’t going to let that pass, so I was then telling my guide about everything, and he was looking around making sure the police didn’t see him because it was apparently not on his itinerary to make that stop. And so after 5 or 10 minutes, I could tell he was getting very nervous, and there were some people starting to gather around us and everything because they don’t see a lot of Westerners over in that area. And then we drove on, and we went up to My Thach, and My Thach was my hang out, where I used to drink beer and stuff. So I asked if we could stop there, and because it was not on my itinerary, and he hadn’t been told not to, he felt he could there, so we spent an hour there and talked to a bunch of people and stuff. And that was good, that was good. I felt much better after
that. I was really upset when he said we couldn’t stop here. I’d come all that way and
everything. But I was pointing out all kinds of things to him about river crossings and
points of ambush. I’d say, ‘We’re going around this corner, there’s going to be this huge
tree,’ and it was. I mean, everything. I hadn’t forgotten anything.

RV: Wow. Did that surprise you?

RM: Yeah, yeah I think it did. Nothing had changed. The only thing that I could
see that had changed was they had this huge electric line coming down paralleling
Highway 14 all the way from Hanoi actually, it comes down. And so all these little
villages, which were about the same size, maybe a little larger, still had the same hooches
with the same bamboo roofs and the ladders leading up to them and everything, exactly
the same, but they had electric lines coming into them off of that big line, and that was
strange. That was about all I could tell that had changed. Vehicles were all the same;
they were all still riding 50cc bikes and little Lambrettas pulling with 10 and 12 people
inside. Nothing had changed. It was weird.

RV: Let’s take a break.

RM: Okay.

RV: Ron, continuing, I wanted to ask you just some general questions about the
Vietnam War. What are your comments and thoughts on the Vietnamization policy?

RM: Well, I am a big fan, if you can use that word, I guess, of General Abrams.
He was my commanding officer, and I think that General Abrams had the right idea. Now
the very fact that we have to use a word like Vietnamization is kind of crazy because it
should have, in my opinion, it should have been Vietnamize from Day 1 and not at the
end. So, I believe that the ideas that Abrams brought to the table as to how he could best
lead our efforts there were correct. Did it work? It didn’t work in the sense of the
outcome of the war probably because it wasn’t started early enough, and as I said, I think
the political problems with Diem in the very beginning were almost too much to
overcome. Diem, you know, the big argument now is whether Diem was the new
revisionist attitudes as he was every bit the nationalist that Ho Chi Minh was. I don’t
doubt that, but he was also, you know, too much of a friend of the United States, and
someone who had been educated here, and he was Catholic. And Ho Chi Minh wasn’t a
friend of the United States, wasn’t Catholic, so he was seen as more of a nationalist,
forgetting communism and democracy and all those things. But I think Vietnamization was probably just too late in coming. We should have been thinking in that mindset from day 1 because we should have never had to say, ‘Well, we’re going to turn it back over to you.’ What do you mean we turn it back over to you? It’s your country, and you’ve been doing it for 4000 years.

RV: What about Nixon’s policies, besides Vietnamization, just how he handled?  
RM: Yeah, bombing the hell out of the North. I don’t particularly have a problem with Nixon’s goals, which was to get out of Vietnam. He came into his presidency with that goal, and he found it to not be as easy as he thought it would be. Problem with Nixon’s policies was, much like so many civilians, they believed that military results can happen easily, and that air power is somehow more important than actions on the ground, and so he relied too much on air power to bring the Vietnamese to their knees, so to speak. And I guess we can say that ultimately, it worked in terms of getting us out in ’73. The bombing they finally said, ‘Okay, I think we’ll adopt a different strategy. We’ll get rid of these guys, and once they go, then we’ll—’ and the plan, I think the plan that wasn’t Ho by that time, but the plan that the North Vietnamese had was to, you know, outlast us, and then maybe, in 10 years, I’ve heard different numbers between 5 and 10 years, will be successful, and they were successful in two.

RV: Did that surprise you?  
RM: Yeah, yeah it did. I thought the South Vietnamese would be able to hold on, and I thought we would have a negotiated settlement just like in Korea, and it didn’t happen, and I think it didn’t happen because the South Vietnamese were not as ready to take over as we thought they were, and there was a legitimate government with a strong military up north and allowing on March of ’73, allowing the North Vietnamese units that were already in the South to stay. Imagine that; that’s ridiculous. You can see why Chu was so upset about that. But Nixon wanted out; he wanted out. And you know, the Berman thesis that Nixon thought that he’d come back in if they broke the truce may be true, but I still can’t believe that since the bombing wasn’t all that successful, why we would have thought that we could have been successful with just bombing after that because we would have to bomb the North and the South by that time.
RV: Sure, sure. Presents other problems. Do you think that bombing or kind of remotely delivered firepower like that is effective as far as changing minds and pushing your enemy to make drastic changes in their policy and the way they prosecute a war?

RM: I’m not a big believer in airpower as a catchall or as a way of solving international conflict. I’m an infantry man, and my attitude is that any war worth fighting is worth fighting on the ground, it’s worth looking your enemy in the eye and challenging him, and if you’re not willing to do that, then you better think twice. As a nation, if you’re not willing to do that, then you’d better think twice about whether you think it can be done with just technology. Bombs are indiscriminate even with the best of technology. There is collateral damage with bombing that there isn’t with infantry soldiers, but Americans, and I guess maybe other nations, too, but Americans have this funny attitude about soldiers on the ground. We can send pilots up at 36000 feet, drop bombs, and get a plane shot down, and it doesn’t have as much impact as it does when two soldiers on the ground are killed by an IED.

RV: Why is that?

RM: I think it’s because of the personal nature of combat. I think that we have a way of thinking that bombing from the skies is some kind of a—less killing is involved, and then of course, it’s just the opposite. We think of this as being less murderous, perhaps, than this.

RV: And you said, ‘this,’ holding your hand up to the air.

RM: Fighting from the air. We also, I think, believe that ground combat leads to more ground combat leads to more ground combat in a gradual escalation because that’s our experience with ground warfare. But my attitude is that when politicians decide to send men into combat, they should think of the ground combat, not the air combat. It’s too easy to think of it as from the air because many times you can succeed and not ever have casualties, I mean, Bosnia, Kosovo is a good example of that. But it’s also true that when the decision is made, when you say to an enemy, ‘We’re not going to use ground troops,’ that’s what Americans think of as what war is, is ground troops. When you say, ‘We’re not going to use ground troops,’ then you eliminate any opportunity for control, any opportunity for controlling the battlefield at that level, and the enemy then is able to do a lot of things that they can’t do, and all they have to worry about is dodging bombs
from the air. So, I just think that that is not the way to fight war is from the air. On the 
other hand, if you’re going to fight a war, you have got to be concerned about the society 
itself, and that’s the main thing. Ours and theirs. Not the soldiers. The soldiers will do 
their job on both sides, but you’ve got to worry about support for the effort on the 
American side and support for the effort of the enemy from in society, and without those 
two things, without understanding how much we are willing to pay, what price we’re 
willing to pay, and how long we’ll stay with our troops, you’ll never be successful in war.

RV: And I take it that you’re making these comments in the context of the 
Vietnam War and that experience.

RM: Yes, yes I am, and when you apply them to other situations—it’s easy to 
apply them historically. It’s more difficult to apply them in current situations because we 
don’t know all of the factors. As historians, we’re just like everybody else; we’re just 
knowing what was important. But in Vietnam, the fatal error, in my opinion, was in not 
understanding the need, recognizing the need to get the people in South Vietnam on the 
side of that government, and we just failed to do that. It’s a cliché, winning the hearts 
and minds, but it’s absolutely true.

RV: What about the media coverage of the Vietnam War?

RM: I think the media, the reporters, did a good job of it. They were not 
embedded exactly, but they sort of were. They got to go wherever they wanted to go 
whenever they wanted to go, so I don’t have a problem with anything that the media did. 
In terms of what they wrote when they came home—if a reporter goes out in the field 
with a unit and sees things and reports back, I have no problem with that at all. I’m 100 
percent in favor of that. What I object to is people reporting the war from a hotel room in 
Saigon, reading the dispatches back and not seeing what’s going on. I have trouble with 
that under any circumstance. And then I have even more of a problem with an editorial 
board basing their reporting on what people have told them that haven’t even been there. 
It just keeps going up. Before long, people are making assumptions about what 
happened. Ask the reporter on the ground because the reporter on the ground probably 
asked the soldier on the ground. If you’re getting it from that kind of coverage, then I’m 
all for it. I don’t blame the outcome of the Vietnam War on the media. The media was 
with us; the media was with us probably until TET. It turned after TET, but even so, if
the cause is worth it, and you’re doing the right things on the ground, and you’re
effectively getting it done, then the media won’t have anything to do with that military
success. So, the argument is that the media turned America against the war. America
was turned against the war when the body bags started coming home in greater numbers.

RV: So why do so many veterans and so many people say that, you know, the two
main causes of our quote, unquote defeat there was the media coverage and the anti-war
movement?

RM: Well, they say that because you’ve got to blame somebody, and it’s easier to
blame things you don’t have any control over than it is things you have control over, and
none of us likes to think of ourselves as having fought in a losing cause. The anti-war
movement, in my opinion, did not end the Vietnam War. Wall Street ultimately said,
‘We can’t afford this war.’ They gave signals to President Johnson first and to Nixon
that the war could not be sustained, the economy could not be sustained at these levels,
and it was middle America finally deciding they didn’t want it. It was middle America’s
kids coming home in body bags that didn’t want it anymore. So I don’t think the anti-war
movement had anything to do with it except for the fact that it did give—there’s no
question in my mind that the American anti-war movement gave comfort and aid to the
enemy. No question about it. They loved the fact that they knew that there were
Americans in high places, in the colleges and everything else, that were against this war,
and they used that to at least give themselves confidence that ultimately, they would
prevail. So, the anti-war movement had an impact in that sense. Did the media feed the
anti-war movement, all that sort of thing? Yeah, probably there were some connections,
but again, you have to go back to the fundamental reason that we lost, and the
fundamental reason we lost, in my opinion, was that the people of South Vietnam did not
have any respect whatsoever for their government. They did see their government as
being their future, and if you combine that with Americans getting tired after 10 years of
fighting a war that they saw no end to and the body bags continuing to come home,
America just decided we were tired of this. There is, you know, I’m a believer in the
Clausewitzian theories of warfare: society has got to support the war. If they don’t, you
don’t have any business fighting it, and you better be able to get in and out quick because
Americans don’t have patience. Vietnamese had patience; they’d been fighting wars for
thousands of years, and our politicians that sent us to fight this war believed that we
could do it quickly, and if that’s what they believed, they hadn’t studied Vietnamese
history. So who is it? Blame somebody. I blame the politicians. I blame the politicians
for believing that a gradual escalation could be successful. It couldn’t be, can’t be,
wasn’t.

RV: How did the Vietnam Veterans Against the War affect you?
RM: I respect their right to believe the things they did at the time, but they
bothered me a lot. I have no respect for those who, first of all, in many cases, lied about
their own service at a time when many of us were still there. There’s the time and the
place for criticism, but the Winter Soldier hearings in Detroit, Michigan, were going on
while I was still there, and my wife was sending me clippings from the Detroit Free
Press and News, and she was essentially asking me if I was doing the things that they
said they did. In many cases, we know they lied. In many cases, those people, some of
those hadn’t even been in the field. They were clerks from Saigon, actors. Forgetting
that for a moment, that was exposed mostly by left-wing media.

RV: Yes.
RM: New Republic and others, but the thing that bothers me the most is that I
think as a soldier, you have an obligation to your fellow soldiers that are still fighting to
not give aid and comfort to the enemy, and when a soldier says something as—I forget
which anti-war leader said it at the time, it was Chomsky or somebody else—said, you
know, ‘One soldier talking is worth a thousand professors,’ and so there is credibility if
you’ve been there, done that, and then you get up, and you make a case. So, I have
always been very protective of how soldiers talk about other soldiers, and I felt that way
then, and I feel that way now about the current situation because I remember how I felt,
and it bothered me a lot. Not that they don’t have a right to do it, but they can do it in
different ways. They can do it more quietly, they can do it by running for office, but
instead, just getting up and telling lies to anyone that would listen to you, or even telling
the truth if you’re telling it in an open forum, and your reason for doing that is going to
impact the morale of those that are still doing the fighting, that bothers me a lot.

RV: The whole Peace with Honor theory that came from the White House and
from the State Department, did you buy into that, and do you buy into it now?
RM: I have to say that at the time that it was happening, I didn’t pay very much
attention to it. I watched every single night as the POWs came home into Clark AFB,
and I just, you know, I cried every night over that. It was so—tears of joy to have those
guys back, but what was going on in Paris and everything, I didn’t pay any attention to it.
In retrospect, there is—I pretty much buy into the Berman thesis on the way that it ended,
and that we forced President Thieu into accepting terms that were really bad for his
government in order to extricate ourselves from the process, from the war. So did we sell
them out? Yeah. Did we have to because of America’s lack of interest in staying? Yeah.
RV: How do you feel about your own service in Vietnam, today?
RM: Well, it’s the defining moments, the defining year of my life. There is no
question about that.
RV: More than when you were married, more than when your son was born?
RM: Absolutely, absolutely. Getting married and having kids and that sort of
thing is a joy, but I’m a different person today because I served in Vietnam. There is no
question in my mind. Some of that’s probably good, and some of it’s probably not good.
RV: How are you different?
RM: Well, I think I’m a much colder person. I retreat into a shell in bad times, in
bad situations. My wife says that when the going gets tough, when things really get bad,
I perform well in stress situations, but it’s afterwards that I go nuts, and so in situations
where I can be of some good because I see bad things happening, I jump right in, and I
have a very coolness about me, in that sense. But I also am not real sympathetic to
people who have problems that I think don’t amount to as much of a problem as I had 30,
40 years ago, so I’m not very sympathetic to things, just little things, like I don’t have any
time for students who don’t come to class, who think their life is so tough. I came home
from Vietnam, and I worked for 27 years in the oil and gas business, and until I had my
surgery to put this pacemaker in, I had missed one day of work in 27 years. And when
they put the pacemaker in, they told me to take off for six to eight weeks, and I took off
three days, and I went back. That was a mistake, and then I paid for it later on, but I
don’t have compassion for people’s problems that don’t exceed those that I think I
suffered through 40 years ago. And that’s not a good thing, but it’s just the way I am.
RV: Is that fair?
RM: Is it fair what?
RV: To those people?
RM: No, absolutely not. That’s why I say it’s not a good thing because everybody’s life you have to look at within the context of their own situation. It’s not fair at all. It’s hard ass, and I’m not proud of it, but I am. You asked me to tell you how I’ve changed, and I don’t think I was like before I went over. I’m probably cynical about government things that happened. I’m cynical, still, about truthfulness from politicians, but I’m also very supportive of American servicemen and women, then and now. I think that’s one of the reasons that I’ve taken on the academic role that I have is that, you know, I’ll talk about war, and I will be very supportive of those on both sides of warfare who fight because I think it’s an incredible experience and an incredible job that you have to do in combat. So, I will make that my academic pursuit, and probably I do a better job with that than I do in teaching political science and things which I’m trained in, but I have this kind of cynical attitude about those who are in those kinds of duties. I’m proud of my service. I’m not embarrassed by it. I speak openly of it now; I didn’t when I came home, but I do now, and I’m very upset, get upset with people who don’t respect those who deserve it. I don’t have any time for that.
RV: Do you think you’re treated differently because you served in Vietnam?
RM: I didn’t realize that it was that way as much when I was in the business world. I didn’t know, as I told you, I didn’t know a lot of Vietnam veterans, and even in the business world, I didn’t see that much of it as I went through my career. And in the business world, I think those that knew I had served had a lot of respect for me, and some of them even, I think maybe even some of the success that I had was as a result of people either seeing traits that were conducive to the business that I was in because of my service. At least some of them said that. It has been less of a pleasurable experience in academe. I still think that there are many people on both sides in the academic world, but since most of the academic men, at least, men in academe did not serve in Vietnam. I still think that in many cases, they’re holding some grudges against those of us that did, and I see that. I saw it in my student days, and I still see it in my professorial days. And that’s bothersome, but as we know, those of us that have studied the war, it won’t be over until all of my generation’s dead, and then the historians can deal with it.
RV: Is there anything you would change about your time in Vietnam? Obviously a hypothetical question, but upon reflection, is there anything you wish you had done differently?

RM: Not really, as much as—as crazy as it may seem, under the circumstances, the way that I went in and everything, I probably would do it again, and I mean, if my country calls and said, ‘You gotta do this,’ I’d do it. I actually believe in universal service of some kind, and my kind happened to be, you know, serving in the capacity that they asked me. I’m very fortunate that what they asked me to do in Vietnam was something that I felt I could do. I was trained well; I loved the role of advisor. I loved it because while I didn’t love being in combat, but if you’re going to be combat, I was fortunate to not have to have been in an American unit where I was constantly losing my own men so to speak, and those that were dying were not my men, they were men who I was advising, and so I was fortunate in that sense. So, I don’t know that I would change very many things. Like I say, it made me what I am, and there’s some good in that, and there’s probably some bad in that, but it is what it is.

RV: What do you think was the most significant thing you learned about yourself from your Vietnam experience?

RM: I think the most significant thing is that you really can—the human body can withstand a lot in terms of stress, the mind can handle a lot, and that decision making in times of stress are something that I do very well. I’m very comfortable with the ability to do that, and I think I exhibited that throughout the rest of my career, and I think I learned that in the military.

RV: What books are the best ones on the war in your opinion?

RM: Well, the best book on the Vietnam War is *We Were Soldiers Once and... Young*, bar none. There’s nothing even close to it in my opinion.

RV: Because it is written by men that were on the ground and did it at various levels. It has great things in there about strategy and tactics. It gives respect, tremendous respect to the enemy, which I think is important, and it’s real, so any course I ever teach on the Vietnam War at any level, that will be a required reading. So that’s my favorite, and there’s nothing even close to it. There are other good things. I liked diaries; I also assign primary sources, and I like the books that have been written. I like Elizabeth
Norman’s book *Women at War*; I think it’s good. I’m a very big fan of the nurses who served in Vietnam, and so I always try to bring a gender side into whatever I teach in that sense. And I like Larry’s books, Larry Berman’s books on the political side of the war. I’ve gotten in the last few years, I’ve read so many of those books in my preparation for my Ph.D. that I’ve gotten away from reading policy books anymore, and I focus more on the war itself. Part of that’s been my duties as a professor. There are those others that enjoy the policy part. It’s not that the policy part bores me anymore, but it kind of bothers me, and so I find myself gravitating away from the new and the greatest stuff in that respect, and maybe that will change as we discover in the archives things that are finally being declassified maybe will change, but probably not. They made a bunch of serious mistakes, policy errors. I’m not a big fan of Robert McNamara, so anything that criticizes him I like. I don’t like his books; I don’t like his mea culpa books, after the fact here. I like biographies, and I like autobiographies of those—they’ll be a lot of those still coming out over the next 20 years as we get older. So I like reading those.

RV: What about movies, good and bad?

RM: The absolute best movie on the Vietnam War in my opinion, and I will always show is *Dear America*. I feel about *Dear America* the same way I feel about *We Were Soldiers Once... and Young* as a book. *Dear America* is the best movie without anything even close to it, in my opinion. It’s a documentary of sorts, but it’s real. I like *We Were Soldiers* as a fictional account of the war. When I went to see *Saving Private Ryan* in 2000, I told my wife, ‘It’s too bad they’ll never make’—and I felt very good when I left that theater. I said, ‘It’s too bad they will never make a movie about Vietnam that makes us feel as good as we did this movie,’ and then the next year they did, and that’s *We Were Soldiers*, and I have great respect for those that made that film because it’s wonderful. But on the anti-war side, I think *The Quiet American*, the remake of *The Quiet American* is very good, and I like *Go Tell the Spartans* a lot. For one of the early films, it says it all. I’m not a big fan of *Platoon* because I think it was Oliver Stone’s warped view of his experiences with the 25th infantry division. I think it’s very fictional, and I think it leaves an impression among viewers that as Charlie Sheen’s character says as he flies out, ‘And the enemy was us,’ and I just don’t buy that. I think that combat
experiences of Vietnam soldiers was not that different than in other wars, and the image
there is that we were all that way.

RV: Drugs, fragging.

RM: Yeah, killing each other and not really having an understanding or feeling
committed to what we were doing. I think the American soldier did a good job in
Vietnam. I have nothing against the American soldier speaking of it as an institution.
Yeah, individual things happen in warfare, but you can find those in every war, but the
soldiers did a good job, and all of those early movies tried to say we didn’t.

RV: Why is it turning then? And I guess the question—

RM: Why is it what?

RV: Why is it turning then where now there is more respect for the Vietnam
veteran? Is it because of age, more understanding or seeing in the light of the current
conflicts?

RM: Well, I think it’s all those things. I think that what happens with time is we
grow up, and I mean that in the sense that some of those reasons that we held the soldier
in such low esteem back then, we now think, ‘Well, why was I like that?’ and then we
say, ‘Well, [...] some of the current attitudes as well. I was never against the soldier, and
that’s pure crap. We know that the anti-war movement was against the soldier.

RV: Is that one of the lasting legacies of Vietnam, perhaps, that we now see the
soldiers differently?

RM: Oh, I think so, absolutely, and that’s a good thing. But I also wonder
whether those that say that they hold the soldier in different light really do or whether
they are just—they hold the current soldiers in a higher light still than the Vietnam
soldier. But in order to feel that way about this soldier, they have to say they felt that
way about that soldier. I think the anti-soldier attitude among the baby boomers still
exists. I think also that it helps in a silly sort of way that a lot of the 60s generation have
seen what they think happened to the Vietnam soldier when he came home by society’s
attitudes. The drugs, the alcohol, the murders, and much of that we know isn’t true, but
the perception is we’re all crazy. And somehow they might feel a little responsible for
that as a society, and therefore they want to make sure it doesn’t happen to these soldiers
coming home from Iraq.
RV: That you’re not all John Rambo’s.
RM: Yeah, we’re not all John Rambo’s, but we also deserve more in terms of society’s acceptance of us, and these soldiers are going to have problems coming home.
RV: Of course.
RM: And so, I believe they’ve seen how screwed up we were, at least they think we were as a group, and so they don’t want that to happen again, so somehow or other, they’re sort of changing their minds about us that served. It’s a complicated answer.
RV: No, it makes sense and is a very interesting take. Does America today overuse the word hero to describe the American servicemen and women who serve abroad and in this country?
RM: Well, depending on your global view of the word hero, they’re all heroes to me because I know what they’re going through everyday, and I am so proud of them, and in some ways even more so than what we did because I went in under the threat of draft. They go in because they volunteered. They volunteered to do this, and that is something that we need to really be proud of them for. But on the other hand, isn’t it ironic that we would have more respect for someone who volunteered to do something, and we would hold in contempt those who had to do it? Isn’t that weird? And I say that with complete support and love for all those who serve today. It’s strange that we’re watching some of these award shows, and every award show somebody gets up and says hello to our fighting servicemen in Iraq, and I love it, and I love it, and I love it, but then my wife and I look at each other, and we say, ‘I don’t remember anyone saying that in 1969.’
RV: Major lessons for the United States from the Vietnam War?
RM: Technology cannot win wars. People win wars; soldiers win wars. Politicians can get you into a war, but they can’t get you out of it; soldiers get you out of it. We have to be very careful as a nation. When we commit soldiers to combat, we have to ask ourselves the basic questions, ‘How long will it take, and will the length be acceptable to American society?’ And the wars since that time that we have been successful in have been of short duration with, quote, acceptable losses. That’s about it.
RV: Do you think the government’s taking care of its Vietnam veterans?
RM: No. I don’t think that the Veterans Administration is doing their job, but I also think that if you study the history of soldiers coming home from wars, it’s never
been different. It’s always been that way, maybe with a little bit of an exception with World War II, but basically, we have never really known how to handle returning soldiers from the first war.

RV: What do you tell your students about Vietnam? Not the teaching the details about it, but when you walk into a classroom or when you might address the young generation today, what do you want them to know about Vietnam? What are your major themes? What do you really want to communicate to them about this war?

RM: Well, I want them to know first of all, it doesn’t have a simplistic answer. It’s not easy enough to just say, ‘It was a tragic mistake,’ or ‘It was a mistake for getting involved.’ They have to understand the war in the context of the Cold War that America was in at the time, so I do a lot of Cold War stuff getting us up to it. But my teaching methods on the war, which a lot of people probably disagree with, that I use are that I don’t give the answers up front to why we were there or whether we should have been there or any of those things because it’s been my experience that once you identify up front what your attitude is on the war, then half of the students at least in the room, they take everything you say with a grain of salt. You’ve lost your credibility as a scholar with that opening statement, and I’ve heard those opening statements from very fine scholars, and I know that’s how I react to it. What is your agenda for the things you’re now going to teach me? So I don’t go there in the beginning. In fact, I may never go there. Under certain circumstances, they know I’m really opinionated about such things as My Lai, and the cover up of Gulf of Tonkin or cover up of My Lai and things like that. So, they know I have certain strong opinions on certain things, but I want them to figure it out for themselves after this whole 16 weeks of fact stuff that I’ve laid out in front of them. I think I’m a better teacher that way than if on Day 1, I say, ‘I’m about to tell you 16 weeks of tragic mistakes on the part of America.’ I don’t know how I serve them best by doing that.

RV: Tell me about the Vietnam War Memorial, and you’ve already touched on this about your experience there the first time, finding your friend’s name, but just tell me about that memorial, looking at it from afar objectively as a war memorial for American society, and then your personal experiences with it.

RM: I was unalterably opposed to its being constructed.
RV: In general or the design?
RM: The design, the design. I couldn’t have been more against it. I thought that it was nothing but a hole in the ground that they were going to cover up the names because I’d been to Washington a lot, and I couldn’t imagine having a memorial that I couldn’t see when I drive by. I was absolutely against it in all respects. I liked the idea a little better when the statue idea came up, so at least it’d be a statue. We can see what we look like, and I held that opinion until I went there, and we didn’t go there until a year after. I went there on Veteran’s Day of 1983, a year after it’d been dedicated, and I was overwhelmed, and I changed my mind completely. It’s one of those things that I can honestly say that one of the biggest mistakes I ever made in my life. If I had been on the committee, I would have rejected the design, and I don’t feel that way today. It’s a wonderful design. I like the fact that in order to see the names, you have to go in it. You have to be part of it. You have to look at your reflection in the wall, and for people my age, to see the names of those who died, they have to see themselves as I look at it, and I like that. I can’t say enough positive things about it. I think Maya Lin is one of the great people of our time to have come up with that idea. It’s wonderful, wonderful memorial.

RV: Ironic that she’s of Vietnamese descent.
RM: She’s actually of Chinese descent. She’s of Chinese descent. She’s Asian, and it’s ironic to me that she was 23 years old.

RV: Yes, so young.
RM: I’d show the documentary of her building the wall or her designing it in my Vietnam classes. I think it’s very important that people understand about how it happened, and I’m very open with them about my attitude, too, because it’s one of those things that I was wrong about.

RV: Well, we’re wrapping up here, and I want to ask you this kind of really large question. Is there anything that we have not covered that you want to talk about, that you feel like we either missed or that means a lot to you that you want to make sure is recorded for history?
RM: Only that I plead with Vietnam veterans to tell their stories because we have been so silent as a group. I hear people say the Vietnam War was the most reported, there has been more things written about it and all this, and I don’t believe that’s true.
There’s been a lot written about it, but the people who haven’t done most of the talking are the guys that fought it, and the women who supported us. I urge all Vietnam veterans to tell their stories. There’s a tendency on the part of so many veterans to say, ‘Well, you don’t want my story, I was just a private.’ They think that somehow military history is made by generals, and it’s not. The best military history we have of the Civil War are those that fought on the lines.

RV: The diaries and the—

RM: Oh, absolutely. We have an obligation to tell these stories, and what the Vietnam Center here and the Vietnam Archives does with the Oral History Project is a wonderful thing, and we just need to get the word out that we want these stories, we want to get them down because they are so important. 30, 40 years from now or less than that now, we’re going to have the same situation with Vietnam veterans that we have now with the World War II veterans dying off, and as we leave this Earth, we need to leave these stories, these experiences. No matter how insignificant we may think our experiences were, we need to leave them for the next generation because this war, I predict, that this war will always be one of the most studied wars in history, even though the outcome was not what we had hoped that it would be. It will be studied for its—not its success, but it will be studied for its failures. But we need the stories of the soldiers who actually fought it because without that, we have nothing in the future but the memories of people who were on the tangents of it, and we don’t want that. We want the stories of those who actually did it.

RV: Is there anything you want to say to someone 100, 150 years from now listening to this oral history interview, for example your grandchild or great grandchild who will be listening to their great-great-grandfather Ron Milam discuss his war experiences?

RM: Only that it will be, 150 years from now, it will be—the complicating thing will be why did I go because my prediction is that the war itself will be one of those wars that we look back on and say, ‘Why?’ and if we say, ‘Why?’ about the governments that did it, we’ll say even more so about why those that served did it when they had other options. And I did it because after figuring out that my options were few, I finally said that my government says that this is a good thing to do, and I had faith in my government
that they knew what they were doing, and so I chose to do it. I don’t regret that. I don’t regret that decision, and to this day, I believe that there were people in the Montagnard villages of the Central Highlands of South Vietnam who had a better life and who maybe lived longer and who learned to defend themselves because of the things that I was able to teach them. So, I think I did some good, even though the final outcome perhaps of the war was not what I would have chosen it to be.

RV: How has this oral history experience been for you?

RM: Well, it’s been a wonderful experience. I’ve been impressed with the professionalism that you have shown. I have learned a lot from this experience. It’s allowed me to shed some light on some things that I had, quite frankly, forgotten about by your probing, and I think it is something that I will not forget the experience, and I’ve enjoyed it very much, and I just, like I say, urge others to do it.

RV: Thank you very, very much for all of your time doing this, Ron.

RM: Thank you.