Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I’m continuing my oral history interview with Dr. Ron Milam. Today is June 30, 2005. It’s approximately 1:18 pm Central Standard time, and we’re in the same place, in the interview room of the Special Collections Library. Ron, let’s continue with where we were. We had been discussing parachuting and your good times there at Benning, but your first day of OCS was not such a pleasant memory, and you described that in detail. And then you had five weeks, and you went home, and you went back to Detroit, I presume or—

Ron Milam: Back to the Detroit area and enjoyed my Christmas vacation and packed up a few things into a U-Haul trailer as I recall and drove down after January 1st, sometime in there, January 7th or 8th or something, I don’t remember exactly—with my wife and set her up in the apartment in Columbus, Georgia, knowing that I would not get to see her very much, but I wanted her to be there. And then I reported to my OCS class.

RV: Okay. How did your parents react to you? You described it, when you went home before, just briefly- your mother kind of being shocked at your language a little bit. Were you as salty when you went home for these five weeks?

RM: I was worse.

RV: You were worse?

RM: I was worse because I had just become an airborne trooper, and I was really full of myself. All of the college graduate, MBA intellectual was gone. I was probably physically at the top of my game because airborne will do that to you. But more so than just physically, I was mentally tough because the confidence that you gain by doing something that others haven’t done, getting enough nerve to jump out of a plane, and maybe for some people, they didn’t take it that way, but for me personally, it was real challenge to have enough bravado to do that. So I was pretty full of myself, and I’m sure I demonstrated that to anyone that would listen.

RV: What did Maxine think?

RM: Oh, I think she was kind of proud of me, but I think she saw that I was a different person a little bit.
RV: For better, for worse?
RM: Well, I don’t know.
RV: In her eyes.
RM: It had been five months since I left home, and in that time I’d gone through basic, AIT, airborne training, become a much bigger specimen than I was, I’d gained, like I say, 25 pounds or so. I don’t know whether she saw it as better or worse. Different, certainly different.
RV: Okay, well tell me, going back down to Benning and getting into OCS, what was it like? What was that first day back like?
RM: The first day back was real hell. It was almost as if these TAC Officers, the Tactical Officers that were going to be running our company, none of them were Vietnam veterans. They were all second lieutenants who had just graduated themselves, at the top of their class and had been held over to be TAC Officers as their first duty station. They would be TAC Officers for four to six months; usually they let them go through one complete class, and then they go to Vietnam. That was to be their training. But they were the best that the previous companies had.
RV: And you’re there for your Officer Candidates School for six months?
RM: Six months. It’s 24 weeks, yes.
RV: And this is in January?
RM: I began in the middle of January and graduated the middle of June.
RV: Okay.
RM: And it was almost as if they were out to prove not only their worth because they had graduated at the top of their class, they knew the system, they knew the importance of different things that we would do, but in addition to that, they were going to take it out on us that we were airborne qualified, something that they didn’t get an opportunity to do because they went right from their class to being a TAC Officer. They would have all liked to do that, but they didn’t get a chance, at least that’s the story they told. And so they set out to make us feel really small, the first thing being, ‘take off those wings, you’ll never get to wear those again.’ And that’s pretty much unheard of because you think of any officer or any enlisted man that ever becomes airborne qualified, his wings are just about the most important thing he wears, other than a CIB perhaps. That’s
very important. We weren’t allowed to wear them on our fatigues; we weren’t allowed to wear them on our caps. We weren’t even, as I recall, when we would go through things like the 8-week party, the 12-week party, the 18-week party, some of those social events, we weren’t allowed to wear them, and we certainly were not allowed to blouse our boots—blouse our pants into our boots, that was not allowed. They really tried hard to break us down. Now I’m sure there was a certain element of that with all Officer Candidate classes. Officer Candidates School is designed to break you down. It’s more so than basic training; the plan there in OCS is to try to make it as stressful as they can get, the closest thing they can get to combat. It’s modeled after Beast Barracks at West Point, and it’s a very tough program. My recent research for my dissertation showed that it had the highest attrition rate by far, of any Army school. 30%, consistently 30% from ’62-’72. Ranger was only 20, so it’s 30% of the people that start don’t make it through, and over half of all those that don’t make it through, don’t make it through for leadership reasons. So it’s very tough, both peer reviews and superior reviews.

RV: Were you all made aware of that high percentage of drop outs? Not specifically, obviously, but were you told, ‘A lot of you here are going to do okay, but some of you aren’t going to make this’?

RM: As I recall, we were told that, but I never knew the numbers until I went back and investigated at Benning, and I went through and looked at all the various classes and things. No, we were told that a lot wouldn’t make it, and we could see that. They had a—it was a very good program in that sense that starting at about the fourth week, every week as I recall, it may have been less frequent than that, but we had to—we had to name the five members of our platoon who we would refuse to go into combat with, that we would refuse to follow into combat. In other words, it had three names, it was called a peer review, or it was called a bayonet sheet, or as most of the guys called it, a ‘fuck your buddy’ report. And it was designed to—the theory being that the best people to know whether someone is a good leader are those that serve with him everyday. And so it was just simply one question, ‘Who would you refuse to go in combat with? Name five.’ And as a result of that, cadets were recycled for failure in leadership.

RV: That’s tough.
RM: It really was. And then you get pushed into another class, and if you get pushed in another class, you come in with two strikes against you, so it’s hard to ever catch up if you get recycled for leadership. And of all the reasons that soldiers were recycled, leadership was the number one. Academics was not all that difficult, I mean, most everyone in our class was a college graduate, so the academic part was not that difficult. The deprivation of sleep and things like that was pretty tough. But basically, they’re trying to break you down; they do that for about the first eight weeks, and then they start to build you back up. By the time—once you become, once you get through 18 weeks, then you become a senior and you become a true candidate, and the last six weeks are physically difficult because you start going out on range of problems and things like that. But the mental toughness part is the first eight weeks; if you can survive the first eight weeks, I think you start thinking that, ‘Just maybe I might make it through this program.’

RV: Were you all aware of these kind of timeframes, if you get through the first eight weeks?

RM: Yes, yes. At 12 weeks there’s a social function, and you get involved in parties and having to—learning how to become an officer. Not necessarily becoming a platoon leader, a rifle platoon leader, but become an officer in the strictest—in the officer and the gentleman sense of the word. So you get to all that kind of training too, in addition to the academics, which like I say, I thought were very good and very well taught.

RV: Tell me what kind of academics were taught.

RM: Well, everything from the typical small unit tactics to armor. We did have helicopter training; we had weapons training on all the weapons, and not just going out and firing the M16, but learning about the M16, learning about the technology behind the M16, in addition to all of the standard weapons that we had learned to fire in basic training. Now we were learning about the weapons themselves.

RV: So when you say academics, you mean there is some classroom—

RM: In a classroom, in a big classroom, just like at a college.

RV: But you’re also out in the field—
RM: But you always—you usually have four hours of academic training during the day, and then four hours of field training, everyday, six days week. Five and a half days a week, Saturday mornings I guess. And then you have—your nights were spent studying; you were supposed to study for two and a half hours every night. In addition, you’ve got all the typical spit and polish, cleaning everything, keeping the place looking STRAC. And then we had training, such as we had nuclear training. We learned to fire the Davy Crockett. 120 mm cannon and a nuclear warhead. We learned CBR, Chemical Biological Radiological warfare. We had a lot of classes on leadership. We had not only leadership training, which had been much, much like what I had in graduate school on management skills, but basically learning how to run a platoon. Then we had those from the classroom who—for those into practical field exercises on problem solving exercises, where one person would be in charge, and you had to figure out how to put this log up on top of that. Those typical kinds of things like that. And so that was probably for the first 18 weeks. The last six weeks were spent more out in the field, demonstrations of weaponry. We would have F4s come in and put on a demonstration. We’d get a chance to call in air strikes and call in napalm and seeing all of these things demonstrated out in a great big field, sitting in bleachers, watching these things take place. And then the culmination was the Ranger problem, as it was called, which I believe was 10 days long at the very end of our training. And after you went through the Ranger problem, then you were allowed at that point, to live off-post. It was the last two weeks of school, and you were allowed to live off-post. That was the only time you could go off with your family. Up until that time, we were only—varying times during the 24-weeks, the first eight weeks you could see your wife on Tuesday night and Thursday night for a half an hour, the first eight weeks.

RV: Where?

RM: In the laundry room—in the day room, she would bring me my laundry, and then she’d take my laundry, and then she’d take care of all that. And she’d polished my belt buckles for me, and do an extra pair—I had about four pair of boots, oh, she was terrific.

RV: Wow.
RM: She’d do all this for me, bring it in. The singles guys didn’t have it nearly as good, I mean, I was so glad I took her with me, just from that standpoint. It wasn’t obviously a companionship situation.

RV: How much does she understand what you were entering into?

RM: Oh, I don’t think she had a clue as to what it was going to be like, but she found out very quickly because she was a member of the—they had an OC Wives club, and the TAC Officer’s wives were in charge of that. So she had to learn to become an officer’s wife. She was no longer Maxine Milam; she was Mrs. Lieutenant John R. Milam, and she even had cards like that. She lost her identity as a person; she became the officer’s wife, or the potential officer’s wife, perspective officer’s wife.

RV: Can’t wait to talk to her about that.

RM: (laughs) Yeah, she’s got some stories. And they would do things like on Tuesday nights, they knew that the wives were due at seven o’clock, and we’d all be anxiously waiting for them in the dayroom, and then at 7:01, they would—or, at 6:59, they would figure out a way to make sure that if your wife was coming, that you were going to be late. And they would do things like force you down in front of them to do push-ups or to hang in a pull-up position on a bar as they berated you in front of your wife. They brought them right into the process, and some of the TAC officers were incredibly mean and rude in all respects, getting a little bit of sadistic pleasure out of that; I’m pretty much convinced that some of them enjoyed that process.

RV: Did you experience any of that personally?

RM: Oh, yeah, yeah. I was very fortunate; I had a very good TAC Officer. Each platoon had a TAC Officer, and then there was an XO of the company, and then the company commander was the captain. But each platoon had a TAC Officer, and the TAC Officer for the 4th platoon that I was a member of was a man by the name of the Lieutenant John Urliccson. A very fine, intelligent—I think he’d been drafted; I think he had attended the University of Rhode Island or UMass, or some place back east, and I think he may even have been an Art History major or somebody like that. He had a real sense of good liberal thinking, but yet he was an Army officer, and he was a good Army officer.

RV: Meaning, liberal arts thinking?
RM: Yeah, liberal arts thinking. Very much a humanitarian, not exactly an
engineer or business background kind of thing like I was. I just thought the world of him,
and he designated me in the very beginning, he wanted me to be his typist; I guess I had
an MBA, why not? So I was kind of his typist, and I couldn’t type worth a damn. So I
spent a lot of time in his office, and we’d developed a relationship that was very solid.
So when he would have to go through his public berating of me, it was always with a
wink of an eye. And I really did appreciate that; it kind of helped me get through.
RV: Did he literally wink or kind of just—
RM: I just knew it was there; I just knew it was there. He was just a real fine
officer, and I don’t have any idea whatever happened to him.
RV: How old was he, and you were what, 23?
RM: I was—by this time, I was 20—yeah this would have be ’69, so I was 20—I
was 23, I would be 24, I guess. 24, I would be 25, I guess. When I was commissioned
was 1969, so yeah, I would turn 25, I guess, that year. And he was probably 22 or 23, a
couple years younger than I was, but he was just sharp as he could be. We would have
long intellectual discussions, not about the war so much, but about Andrew Wyatt
paintings and thing that were just a little bit beyond what most of my other colleagues
were doing. I just really appreciated the man, and he was so—he was the only one in the
entire company, the other TAC Officers were in many ways—I’m not sure how many of
them were even college graduates. We had an unusual class. Out of 160 of us, I guess,
140 were airborne qualified, and of that 160 class, I’ll bet 150 were college graduates. So
we were unique.
RV: That’s an intimidating class for the TAC Officers.
RM: For a TAC Officer it was, absolutely. And I don’t think it was particularly
unusual during that period of time because of this College Option program that they had
put in; they had a lot of college graduates. We, for instance, had the editor of the Harvard
Law Review as a second—they were trying to become a second lieutenant in the infantry.
Brilliant guy. We had people like that that were just really good, good men, and I think a
cut above all, except Lieutenant Urliccson, as far as character, intellect, education,
everything else, compared to the TAC Officers. And I think they have sensed it a little
bit. We were a good class; we were a damn good class in all respects.
RV: Was it just coincidence that you wound up with Lieutenant Urliccson or Erickson?
RM: Urliccson. I think it was U-R-L-I-C-C-S-O-N.
RV: Okay, but it was just chance?
RM: Yeah. Yeah, and then he selected me to be his administrative guy. I was terrible at it; I mean, I was terrible at the skill power of it, but I got to keep track of all the records for our platoon, you know, and these bayonet sheet things, I was the one that kept track of it. So I was kind of his counselor in a lot of sense. I think after awhile that helped me in a lot of ways. And then after eight weeks we were allowed to see our wife, between eight weeks and 12 weeks, we could see our wives on Sunday—in additional to the Tuesday/Thursday, we could go to church on Sunday mornings between 8 and 12 with them. Well, you go to church for an hour, you can do anything else you wanted for three hours. And those are some stories.
RV: I’ll ask Maxine about that. She’ll just stare at me quietly. Smile, probably.
RM: And then I think after 18 weeks, we were allowed to actually get off at noon on Saturday and stay out until six o’clock on Sunday night, and then the last two weeks, we moved off-post. So that was about it as far as personal life was concerned.
RV: That’s a good description of all of OCS. I have some specifics, if you would, if you don’t mind taking the time to comment on what you thought. OCS or Benning or the Army or the TAC Officers or what you all saw as the cloud over you that was a good leader. What defined, in their eyes, in the Army’s eyes, you know, people who set this program up, what was a good leader, and then what would lead to someone getting the bayonet sheet?
RM: Well, first of all, let me just say, I think the Army’s OCS program during the Vietnam War, that which I experienced, was very good, very well organized, the training was excellent. I think they prepared—of the three branches, and part of this is me now looking back, part of it’s my research and my dissertation—I think OCS produced the best officer for combat in Vietnam. No question. I think they produced a better officer than the West Pointers and the ROTC people. And some of that is born out by interviews that I did, some of it’s born out by research that’s been done, and some of it’s born out by the evaluations that were done during the Vietnam War by liaison teams that were
dispatched from Benning. Benning sent liaison teams every six months to Vietnam to
interview generals, field-grade officers, peers and NCOs about the leadership—about the
leaders they were producing at Benning because they wanted to know whether they were
getting it right or not. So they would have these teams go out, and they’d spend a month
to six weeks in the field interviewing, so they could make changes to the program to
make sure they were getting it right.

RV: Was anybody else doing this that you know of?

RM: Well, I don’t know whether the other OCS classes—it was Benning, Sill, Ft.
Campbell for armor and Ft. Belvoir for engineers, so I don’t know if the other ones did or
did not. My research was strictly about Ft. Benning and about infantry, but they sat down
and went through. And so I read the evaluation reports from all these liaison teams in
Vietnam, and the one thing that they kept saying, and this is probably a way to answer
your question, ‘What did the Army see was a good leader?’ The best part about an OCS
graduate was they had been an enlisted man, and as a result of having been an enlisted
man for one year, that would be their basic, their AIT, and six months in OCS, they had a
year behind them in the Army. And as a result of that, they tended to understand the
enlisted man’s problems, more so than the West Pointers who had been college students
for their entire four years or the ROTC students who had been college students and
ROTC on the weekends or in drill situations. So what the generals and the field-grade
officers were saying during the war was that the OCS guys were the most ready to
command. The ROTC people were next, and the West Pointers were [last], and it was an
arrogance; it appeared to be an arrogance. So I think what Benning saw as the most
important element of leadership was somebody that could instill in their soldiers the
importance of the mission, or, if the mission was stupid, if the mission didn’t make any
military sense, could explain why they were going to do it anyway or put it into their
terms. It’s a really tough thing in a war that as it went on, the military necessities started
getting smaller and smaller, and that was evident to everyone.

RV: I wonder if that was a product of the time, post-TET, if you will.

RM: Oh, absolutely.

RV: Versus ’65.
RM: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. When I teach the Vietnam War, one of the things that my students are required to do, we do a lot of film work, and they’re required to compare Hollywood’s version of the soldier in 1965 in *We Were Soldiers* to *Platoon* or to *Full Metal Jacket* or to *Hamburger Hill*. And you’ll see the difference… *Full Metal Jacket*’s really good in that sense because you’ll see the difference in the training, but the unit—sending units over together instead of sending them over as repos. Yeah, I think it is a matter of the time, but we were unique in that we were late in the war, and yet we were—because of this, the TET, coming right after TET and with the changes in taking away all of these Non-Combat Arm Officer Candidates Schools, we were all forced into the infantry. I would say of my class of 140, 160 men, there may have only been 20 or 30 of us that would have wanted, as our first choice, to have been in the infantry. We were all finance guys; we were all, you know, logistics experts because that’s what we did in school. We were going to be a supply officer, and all of a sudden now, we’re in the infantry. But I think my class may have been unique compared to say, a year before, but I don’t think we were unique to the battalions of Officer Candidates Schools at that time because I think they all of a sudden had all these college graduates. But that was also the period of time when the 2S deferments were going away; it was quite [before] lottery, that comes a little bit later, but it was at a time when you got out, you’d given them your word that if they’d let you finish your graduate degree, you’d go in. And so a lot of guys were going in, and infantry seemed better than being an enlisted man. So I think we were unique in that sense. But I think the Army did a good job, and I think the Army cared to make sure—they wanted to make sure they were doing a good job with this training, and so that’s why these liaison teams were going to Vietnam so frequently. And that’s a lot—I mean these teams would be 20 men, and they’d go for, like I say, a month to six weeks, and all the records are at Benning.

RV: I’m wondering as a historian myself and then looking at your personal experience and how you’re describing the Army, the Army sounds very good, like they did a good job, you just used a word that they care. What do you have to say about those Army veterans of the Vietnam era, who say the Army didn’t care, and the Army really did a lousy job of preparing us for Vietnam? And of course, that is going to vary with personality, it’s going to vary with age, maturity levels, it’s going to vary with the time
during the war, lots of different variables in there. But in general, when I hear that, as a historian, when I’m interviewing Army veterans, what would you say about that?

RM: Well, I believe, first of all, that the Army did the best job that it could with the manpower demands that were placed on it by the politicians. First of all, let’s keep that in mind. I do think that there is something inherently wrong with training men for eight weeks and then training them for another eight weeks and then sending them out to kill people. That’s hard to teach people in four months. Think of the training that we gave to World War II soldiers, how much longer it was. I mean, there were units started training in 1941, went into combat in ’44. I mean, it was a much longer training exercise. We sit here today, and we’re critical of the Iraqis not being able to learn to fight in the amount of time that we’ve given them to learn to fight. We tried to do it four months. I’m not sure that we did a great job of that. We tried though. In other words, the training was as good as it could be under the manpower demands of the ramp up of forces that were necessary to meet the 19—May 1965, and then they replace us. I mean, it was a huge ramp up, that you know. 100,000 to 500 in a short period of time. So I do have that concern, but in terms of what we did produce with those parameters, I think we did a pretty good job of it. I don’t believe, and I studied as a historian of the war after and within the last five or six years, I studied at length the RAND reports, the BDM reports, the personnel, the volumes on personnel that try to lay the blame for America’s defeat at the hands of the soldiers, and I just don’t buy it. I don’t buy it on the officers or the enlisted men. You want to put the blame for it on some of the strategy, and I will get into that when we get into the war. I’m very critical of the war preterition. So I have some strong beliefs about that, but in terms of the kind of soldier that we produced with the amount of time we were given to do it, I think the Army did a good job of it. I really do.

RV: Do you think that your experience at Benning with OCS, and we haven’t really—we have more to talk about there—was enhanced because you were an intellectual, and you’re saying a lot of people in your company were intellectuals; they were college graduates, but I don’t think, personally, college graduates equal intellectualism, but you in particular. You’re able to sit and talk paintings with your TAC Officer, that’s unusual. That is a unique experience, and how much did your—I don’t
want to say brain power, but how much did your ability to intellectualize and articulate those thoughts shape your experience?

RM: I think it did to a certain extent. I think it also helped maintain sanity. So much of what you do in the Army is absurd. I happen to believe that not just among Americans, I think in any society, teaching men, and now women, but teaching men then to kill people is hard. It’s not natural. There’s something kind of strange about going to school for eight weeks to learn how to do that well, and then going for another eight weeks to learn how to do it even better. And we know that the training we gave soldiers in World War II was difficult for that reason; we know—I don’t buy all of S.L.A. Marshall Men Under Fire, but I buy some of it, you know, it made a lot of men refuse to pull the trigger against Germans and things. We don’t seem to have had that problem as much in Vietnam, but it’s very unnatural. The average person just doesn’t take to it, so you have to be good to train people to be able to do that. But it’s kind of crazy when you think about it, that you as an adult would take time out of your life at the 18, 19 or 20 year of your life to go learn how to kill. And that’s what infantry soldiers do. All of the other things that we teach people to do in the military, like fly airplanes, flying airplanes has a civilian application. Okay, maybe dropping bombs doesn’t, but that’s pushing a button. Artillery maybe so, but you never see the enemy; he’s so far away. Engineers, you can build bridges, or you can blow bridges up, but combat engineers kind of do both. Driving a tank is kind of like driving a big SUV—well, you have SUVs, but driving a big truck. Infantry soldiers learn to kill people and look at them when they kill them. That’s what we train them to do. So it’s not natural, so the Army has to be really good at what it does. As a soldier trying to learn how to do that, or as a leader trying to motivate people to do it later on, as we would try to do, it becomes—you almost look for things to grab onto to keep your sanity, to laugh a little bit about what it is you do. Part of the way you do that is you sort of think, ‘Well, maybe it’ll never happen, maybe I’m just doing this to learn this skill, but I’ll probably never really use it.’ Well that’s fine if you’re in the National Guard; that’s fine if you’re in the Reserves—back then, not now, but back then. But now it’s getting closer. Certainly if you’re in the 7th week of AIT, and you’re 19 years old, and you’re at Ft. Polk, you know that them teaching you that hand-to-hand combat may be something you’re going to use in the next month. As an officer, you start
all of a sudden paying attention. ‘Maybe I’m going to really need to know how to put
that bangalore up underneath that concertina, or maybe I’m going to have to know how to
use that LAW, maybe I’m going to have to know how to convince my troops that
carrying the M79 really is important and taking the sights off, so they don’t catch on
jungle vines.’ It’s important for them to know how to do that. You start really thinking
about that. It’s still absurd; for someone that’s just been through college, and somebody
that’s planned on becoming an accountant or something, oh, my gosh. You learned how
to kill people in this other school, and you knew that you probably wouldn’t need that for
a long time, but now all of a sudden, you’re going to have to learn to teach those men, in
Vietnam when you get them, how to kill more efficiently. It’s very strange, so I think the
intellectual level that we all possessed, on the one hand it’s a detriment because you sort
of see through it. But what I tried to focus on is these pedagogical skills that these men
have in order to get us to do those things and to learn it and to want to learn it because we
are motivated now by the survival that’s going to be required in a few months for us to
learn.

RV: That right there is… you’re saying that during that time, you saw through all
that stuff, and maybe a lot of your company did. But your experience was, ‘Okay, I’m
going to be a future teacher of this.’

RM: Absolutely.

RV: ‘I’m going to have to practice this, and so hence, I need to really pay
attention and learn this.’ Did you see your peers being this analytical about it?

RM: The 4th platoon was a great platoon; we were the best platoon, too.

RV: Of course you were.

RM: Something unusual about us in that sense. We had a professional boxer; we
had some interesting people, and I loved every one of them. We got rid of all the ones
that we didn’t think could do it, I guess. I don’t know that I set myself aside or apart in
that sense. I don’t remember that I felt that way at the time. I think we had all just sort of
accepted our fate and just tried to learn to do it as best we could. I know we laughed
about it a lot; at night when everything was quiet, we would talk about some NCO that
we had had that day that was teaching us about booby traps, for instance, and we’d say
things like, ‘Geez, you think they really have those things over there like that? You think
that we’re going to really see that stuff?’ And I think as the time went on, we got more
serious about what we were learning. In the beginning it was maybe—and in basic and
AIT, I think it was silly, I think we wrote it off that way. But as it got closer to that
commissioning date, I think the Army did a good job of as you got further down the
training, you started realizing the seriousness of it.
RV: Were you still thinking that you weren’t going to be, you know, necessarily
going to Vietnam immediately, and you still had that chance the war was going to end, or
was this—
RM: No, I’ll tell you what. About the 18th week when I had made up my mind
that I was going to accept my commission because there was guys talking about turning
them down. You know, as I said, if you turned them down, but that time you only had a
year to serve, you could turn them down—you could go do your year in Vietnam and be
out of the Army. But I was starting to say, ‘No, I’m going to do this; I’m going to take
this commission.’ And I also knew by that time I wasn’t going to end up in the top three
of my class.
RV: How’d you know that?
RM: My skills, I mean, my grades. My grades were good, but they weren’t that
good because the infantry OCS is based on ability to lead and be measured to lead.
Anyone that can score high enough on the leadership skills in infantry OCS sure as hell
isn’t going to choose the Finance Corps. There’s something special about having that
kind of skill, and the three guys that graduated at the top of the class were the best
leaders. They were just as gung-ho as they could be about everything.
RV: But was it gung-ho-ness, or…
RM: I think it was gung-ho because the graders for the leadership part of the
course would have been career officers, mostly field-grade, and that’s what they were
looking for. Gung-ho is not an easily term to define, whether that means screaming and
yelling or whether it means showing the skills in a fire-and-maneuver exercise. It’s hard
to put your finger on what leadership is. You know, the Army has FM100-4, or whatever
it is, that defines what leadership is. The problem is it was based on World War II
strategy and tactics, so it never got updated for guerilla warfare, at least not that I ever
saw. But I think that by the time I got to that point, about the 18th week, I said, ‘Yeah,
this is going to happen. I’m going to be commissioned in the infantry. Maybe I’ll get
lucky,’ and I think I thought maybe I’d be a TAC Officer; I think that was what I was
thinking would be a good think, I think, ‘I could do this, I could do it like Lieutenant
Urliccson did it, not like those other yahoos,’ but he would be one that I would have as a
role model. And so I was thinking that might happen, and then I get commission, and I
get my orders for the 82nd Airborne Division. I was ecstatic; I really was. It was just a
primo assignment.

RV: I guess we could go on and on about this time, but does your ability back
then to analyze but still play the game, still see the absurd, as you say, but also play the
game and… does that hurt you, or I guess, on the way of asking is does an individual’s—
and I’d like you to comment on yourself—an individual’s analytical skills, if they’re high
enough, does it get in the way of the gung-ho-ness?

RM: I think you can play the gung-ho part and understand when you need to turn
it on and when you need to turn it off, just like you would in a classroom, you turn it on
and turn it off sometimes or in any other life’s applications.

RV: Could you do it?

RM: Yeah, yeah, I think I was pretty good at that. I look back on it now, and I
say that I think I studied hard to learn the skills that were necessary to do the job in
Vietnam because I started to realize about the 18th week that it was going to happen.

RV: Did you tell Maxine this?

RM: Well, we didn’t see each other very much, and I don’t believe we talked
about it that way. I think what we said was, ‘We’ve got probably six months.’ I
graduated in June of 1969, and I think we believed that we had six months before I’d go
to Vietnam, and that would include leaves on either end of it. See, the Army had a four
month requirement. You had to have four months of troop-training before they could
send you to Vietnam, and so that translated into about six months of time between you’d
actually show up. And I think we were just saying, ‘Okay, it’s inevitable. Let’s make
sure that these next six months are the best times of our lives. Let’s really enjoy it.’

RV: Were you inside or outside externally saying, ‘Okay guys, let’s keep
negotiating over there in Paris; let’s keep going.’

RM: Yeah, we paid attention to that a little bit, but mostly we tried to have fun.
RV: What did you do to have fun? Would you say that the most fun of your life—I do have a couple other questions about OCS, but as far as the PG-13 version, what did you do to have fun?

RM: Well, the first thing we did is we took two weeks off, and we went to Virginia Beach, Virginia. Drove up from Benning, but the more amazing thing than that, I guess, is that two weeks that I told you that I was going to get to live off-post, Maxine got pregnant. We didn’t know it at the time, but when we went then to Virginia Beach, we were body surfing, and we were just hanging out there and doing all kinds of things. And she was at least six weeks pregnant at the time; we didn’t have a clue.

RV: Wow.

RM: And so by the time that I reported to the 82nd Airborne Division, well into I guess we must have gotten in there in July or so, she was pregnant. And so we were—but even that, we still had a great time. The 82nd Airborne Division was a wonderful assignment for a young junior officer like I was, and I was the Executive Officer of the Headquarters Company of the 1st Brigade. And it couldn’t have been a better assignment because Headquarters Company includes all the staff officers and the line officers of the whole division—of the whole brigade, excuse me. And so I got to rub shoulders with all the bigwigs, and I was in charge of things that were important to the brass, you know, inspections, IG inspections and the United Fund and all those kinds of things. But I also got to jump a lot; I got to go out on jumps anytime I wanted to pretty much. I had—it was essentially an 8 to 5 job.

RV: How long did this last?

RM: I was there until January, middle of January, so from middle of July to middle of January. I got my orders for Vietnam, however, in October.

RV: Before we go there, if you would bear with me, any other comments on leadership according to the Army? You mentioned that one—being able to explain the importance of the mission, regardless of what the mission is.

RM: And I think really empathizing with your troops, that can’t be overstated enough. You have to understand what it’s like to be an enlisted man. And example would be, in Vietnam, officers were supposed to only serve six months in combat, and enlisted men served 12, and understanding that it’s different for them because they don’t
have all the opportunities that an officer has, even though the officer has a lot of responsibilities that they don’t have in terms of that. So I think that’s the second most important thing, is understanding and empathizing with the plight of your men. And being willing to do anything, absolutely anything that they do… knowing all the skills that are necessary to do what they do and doing them and letting them know that you’re doing them.

RV: Was this who you were in Vietnam?

RM: Well, it’s who I would have been if I hadn’t have been an advisor. I’m sure of that. I guess it was to a lesser extent with my team, the small team that I had, and I think to a certain extent my allies, the people we were advising.

RV: Do you regret that today?

RM: That what?

RV: That you did not have the opportunity to show—

RM: You know, in some ways I do. I think I would have liked to have been a platoon leader in a major American unit division, but I say that having studied it. I’m sure at the time I didn’t feel that way. Being advisor was a great job.

RV: In what way?

RM: Well, let’s see, how can I put this so it doesn’t sound—well, it is, it’s an ethnocentric as it can be because all of the combat that I was in and all the death and destruction I saw, it was not Americans being killed; it was Vietnamese and Montagnards. As sad as that is, it wasn’t Americans. So I was a mercenary, in a sense. And as bad as I felt, it’s different; I had one of my men killed, only one, in that sense. And it would have been a lot more if I had been in an American unit.

RV: Sure. That’s a very good point. Did you ever communicate your admiration for Lieutenant Erickson—Urliccson?

RM: Yeah, I sure did. When I was commissioned and I saluted him, of course, he was still a second lieutenant, too, and I became his peer, I told him that and shook hands with him; he was a wonderful man.

RV: Why haven’t you followed up with him? It is just something that just time has taken over you?
RM: I haven’t followed up with hardly any of my buddies from OCS or Vietnam. I don’t have an explanation for it.

RV: Okay. Did Maxine’s pregnancy change your outlook on going to Vietnam?

RM: It sure did. Absolutely. We were so happy because there was some thought as to whether we should let that happen, in the sense that once you know you’re going and in that ’69 period with the causalities being what they were, and even back then before Hollywood got a hold of us, with the issues of junior officers, the story of the second lieutenant—second or first lieutenant’s life span being 15 minutes was pretty well known. We knew that officers die a lot; captains died at the greatest rate of any rank as a percentage, and first lieutenants were right behind them. So we knew that, and we talked about, ‘We should have a kid because that will be something to leave behind if I don’t come home.’ So we talked about it pretty openly. My wife’s a very positive person, and she never believed it. I mean, she believed I was going, but she believed I was coming back.

RV: Is that wishful thinking, or is that—she really did—

RM: I think it was a little bit of both. I don’t think she ever really had a grasp on the war until I came home and started talking about it. She didn’t watch a lot of television, I don’t think, while I was gone. It bothered her a lot. But I think we also said, ‘Hey, you know, if I’m going to be over there, then you having’—we didn’t know it would be a son, of course, didn’t have those great things, be able to know whether it was a boy or girl, but we were very happy that we had a son and that she was able to spend totally 12 months of her life with him and only him. So I think we were glad that that happened, but it did change my perspective. But I also don’t remember having a son being—having that become the most important thing because the most important thing was getting ready and training to go over there and surviving. So I trained hard when I went to my training for Vietnam, but first, like I say, first we wanted to enjoy life, and we had a good time. I remember getting my orders, and the orders, like I say, it was October that I got my orders, but my orders were October—in October, I get orders to go to Vietnam in May, so it’s way out there, as opposed to guys that got orders to go to Vietnam next week or next month, I mean. So that was—we even looked at that as a positive thing, said, ‘Wow, that’s really nice that we’ve got that much time together.’
That meant I’d be home for my son’s birth, that means I’d be home for three months of his life, and that was important.

RV: That’s huge.

RM: And I remember—I don’t remember sitting around being depressed about it. Not a bit. I mean, not that I wanted to go, but I don’t remember letting that drive my life. I remember saying, ‘Hey, that’s what’s going to happen, that’s in May, this is October, let’s enjoy it.’ And we just enjoyed the heck of our time with the 82nd, all respects.

RV: Have you, again, you don’t have to comment on this at all, but have you gone back and taken a look at that process more from an emotional level? Not that you weren’t at the time, but as an end, we are able to compartmentalize and kind of block some stuff off and check boxes. That is an extraordinary attitude to have. I’m not passing judgment; that is a unique attitude and a very positive one. How do you account for that? Is that your personality?

RM: Well, it probably is to a certain extent, but I think also you look at what your options are, and your options are to fight it and be miserable all the time or to enjoy the moment, and I think we’ve always lived our lives, I’ve always lived my life that way, to enjoy the moment. No matter how bad it is, find something in it that you enjoy, that you can get out of it and that brings you satisfaction. In that case, I think it was looking forward to the birth of our son, focusing on my job at the 82nd. Because I had this kind of weird job as an XO of a Headquarters Company, I was the Pathfinder Platoon leader.

And so when we went on operations, like we jumped into Turkey—I don’t remember if I talked about this yesterday or not? But we jumped into Turkey on the Bulgarian border in Operation Deep Furrow, and I was the Pathfinder Platoon leader, so I was the first man out of the door. I got to set up the drop zone and watch the 82nd Airborne Division and all those Greeks and Turks with them jump into Turkey. That was exciting, and I got to serve coffee to General Westmoreland. For the next three weeks, I didn’t have anything to do while the operation took place, then I went to Istanbul and redeployed the entire 82nd Airborne Division back to Ft. Bragg. A lot of responsibility for second lieutenant.

RV: Absolutely.

RM: And a lot of fun. And that was in November, November of ’69.
RV: So tell me, kind of map that out for me, your time with the 82nd there, before you deployed to Vietnam. You’re there at Headquarters, you’re taking care of logistics—

RM: Yeah, yeah, it was just kind of a crazy job. I had a captain who was a two tour Vietnam Green Beret. Nice guy, Jim Kennedy. And he was younger than I was; he was 21 years old and was a captain and had two tours. Yeah, he was—OCS guy. Nice man, and we always got along real well, got along with him. You know, I don’t remember too much about the actual job. I remember I came in everyday, and I sat at a desk, and I had Lieutenant Milam on my name thing there. And I shuffled papers and everything, and I looked good, and I broke starch everyday. And then I’d go over to the building and hang out with the majors and the lieutenant colonels and make sure they had whatever they needed. And then when we would plan an operation, like this huge operation, I was very much involved in all the planning of that. But it was more like being a, not a clerk, but it was sort of like being a low-level manager in your first job out of college. I was able to use my business skills; in fact, I really used those because I was in charge of all the administrative things of the company, so I had payroll. I was the pay officer, so every month I had to strap on the ol’ 45 and go take out about 100,000 dollars in cash and pay all the men. They’d all whip that salute on me, and I’d pay them and get them to sign. And then I’d get my driver, I had a driver, and we’d drive into Fayetteville, and we’d go to the jails, and there were so many of our guys in jail. And we’d have to pay them, give them their pay. Both the county jail and the city jail. And then, usually on payday, I was also the officer of the day, and I’d have to go into town. And I’d have to—I’d be the OD in town, and we’d end up going to bars, and guys would get thrown out of bars and get arrested, and we’d have to go sign for them and all this kind of stuff. It was a heck of a job. Really exciting in a lot of ways. We were there, we were at Ft. Benning—I mean at Ft.—

RV: Bragg.

RM: Bragg when the McDonald murders happened.

RV: Oh, right.

RM: They were there, yeah. So we had that little bit of excitement. Like I say, I went on Operation Deep Furrow to Europe

RV: That was a NATO exercise?
RM: Yeah, NATO exercise, and it was wonderful; I just enjoyed every minute of that.
RV: What did you think of Turkey?
RM: It’s interesting you ask. I thought at the time that Istanbul—I’d never been out of the United States, it was my first trip out of the country. We flew to Milan and staged, and remember this is Cold War, we flew like below radar all the way from Milan to across Greece all the way into above Turkey and then came up to about 1400 feet and made our jump. Guys were getting sick; it was really pretty rocky ride, but I was platoon leader of 30 men is all we had, and we had all these signs in bright orange and red and green, and our job was once we landed, to spread out all over this drop zone and put these down because those were the designations for the division which is in the air behind us. Deuce and a halves, jeeps, everything, we’re dropping everything in on this drop zone; it was really something to watch. So it was exciting; it was just as exciting to me. Left Maxine home, it was the first time that I’d been away from her in that sense, I guess, other than when I was in basic and stuff, so that was exciting. But I was on orders, like I say, for Vietnam, but my next duty station was going to be staying—and this was another nice thing—was going to be staying at Ft. Bragg and going to the John F. Kennedy School for Special Warfare.
RV: How did you get that?
RM: Well, that’s because I was going to be an advisor, and I was going to be designated as a MACV advisor because MACV had taken over, by that time, MACV was taking over all of the Special Forces Camps in Vietnam. They were bringing the 10th Special Forces group home, or they were redeploying them because of Czechoslovakia. That was the story, is that these guys were going to get involved in what was going on in Europe. Truth of the matter is, I think the Special Forces were being redeployed because some of the accusations and things that were going on with some of their atrocities and things, as after My Lai. And so they’re being redeployed, and we’re going to take over their camps. So it may have been that I would have gotten a Special Forces assignment. I don’t know that for sure; I’m guessing that when they drew it up, that’s where I was going to go because that’s where I ended up going to the training camp for Special Forces. But it was what they call the MATA course; it was a course for military advisors.
It was for 12 weeks, and it was four hours of language training everyday followed by four hours of military training... and cultural things and learning about the history of the Vietnamese people and the history of the war and all those things that you as an advisor would need to do. And it was all grades. NCOs and all the way up through lieutenant colonels, if you were going to be an advisor in Vietnam, you were going to take that training course. And we had 12 weeks of that, and then we were to be assigned—I had another 12 weeks at the Defense Language Institute at Ft. Bliss, Texas, which was a solid 12 weeks of language school, eight hours a day.

RV: Of Vietnamese?

RM: Of Vietnamese language. After having studied it four hours a day for 12 weeks at the MATA course. I guess I’m probably off by a month here when I think about it because it was January, February, March, April and May, so five months. Somehow or other the split somewhere of them. Five months total between MATA and DLI.

RV: Why don’t we take a break for a minute, Ron? Okay, Ron, is there anything else you want to say about your time at Bragg with the 82nd? I would like you to talk a little bit about Special Warfare school.

RM: It was a good school; it was, like I say, a lot of history, of Vietnamese people, a lot of cultural issues. We had Vietnamese women taught the language part of the program, and then in the afternoons, we had, like I say, a lot of other stuff that had to do with the country, the geography. In fact, one of the books that you have out here in your showcase, *Handbook on Pacification*, that was one of our—was part of our classroom materials.

RV: Interesting. Based on what you know now, just looking back quickly, were they on target with cultural, geography?

RM: They were on target, they just didn’t teach it to enough people. They taught it to us as advisors; they should have been teaching it, in addition to teaching it to us, they should have been teaching it to the officers that were going to lead American units, so that the soldiers would have had some kind of an appreciation for the people. I think we failed in that respect, but as far as being advisors, we got good training. We got good training about the Vietnamese people.

RV: How difficult was Vietnamese for you?
RM: Real difficult. I’m not a real good language student anyway. I had gone through my bachelor’s degree and my master’s degree, and I had never taken a foreign language in college; I had Latin back in high school. So it was hard for me, and I must say this too: I was not, for the MATA course in language and even at DLI, I think I was probably not as motivated as I should have been.

RV: Why not?

RM: I don’t know the answer to that. I think that once I got—particularly once I got to the Defense Language Institute there at Ft. Bliss, I had decided, as had most of my friends, that we were going to enjoy those last eight weeks in-country that we had in the States, and we did. Played a lot of tennis, and we didn’t do any homework; I don’t know if we were expected to or not. We went to parties all the time. I spent a lot of time with my new son. Well, see, that’s another story. We were scheduled to be done with—at Ft. Bragg, we were supposed to be done, I guess, about the middle of February, middle of February, and our son was expected to be born March 15th in El Paso, Texas. So, Maxine went to the doctors and was checked out, and they told her that everything looked good, and that Alex—well, our son, we knew it was a son—but he would be born right on time in El Paso. So we loaded up all of our worldly possessions into a U-Haul, including my motorcycle, and we started driving that thing across country, from Ft. Bragg to El Paso. And we got to Meridian, Mississippi.

RV: On I-20?

RM: Uh-huh. And her water broke in the Howard Johnson, and our son was born the next day, emergency basis. Everything turned out fine, so we spent five days in Meridian and then drove on to El Paso with the new baby. So that was kind of exciting, and I think after my son was born, I lost a little bit of interest in everything I was doing. Knowing I was going to Vietnam, my big interest was him and her and my friends and having a good time and going to Juarez and crazy things. I don’t think I took the language training as seriously as I should have. As it turned out, it didn’t make any difference because I was sent to a Montagnard village where no one spoke any Vietnamese. So it’s probably hurting me now more than it did then, but the Army tried real hard. I think there was also sort of that, kind of that feeling that you get that, ‘I don’t have to necessarily be good at this. I’m still going to Vietnam whether I’m good at this
or not, and I’ll still probably be able to do my job whether I’m good at this,’ because we
had heard that, you know, you would have interpreters whenever you needed them and
stuff like that. I did appreciate the culture issues, the culture things though.

RV: What were they telling you culturally?

RM: Well, surprisingly, they did some of the same things that we teach here.
They taught us about the relationship between the Vietnamese and the Chinese, and they
taught us about the strength of family, and they taught us about the respect for the elders
that the Vietnamese people have. And I can remember at the time thinking, ‘If they have
such respect for the elders, why are we all moving them all in from the jungle into the
more pacified areas of the highways?’ It wasn’t the Strategic Hamlet Program; we
learned about that, too, but by that time, that was behind us. That was 1965, ’63, ’64, and
now we’re in ’70, so we’re way beyond that, but we’re still doing the same thing, we’re
just creating free fire zones and all that stuff. So we questioned things like that. It was
good training, and that part was quite interesting to me, but I kind of lost interest in the
language part by the time I got to El Paso, I think.

RV: So the cultural stuff was hit both at Bragg and Special Warfare School?

RM: It was mostly at Bragg, yes.

RV: What did you think of Fayetteville, North Carolina. And the nickname in
North Carolina in the 1970s and ‘80s was ‘Fayettenam.’ What did you think of that?

RM: I liked it. We lived in Spring Lake, which is just north of Fayetteville, first
suburb north, out of town, out of the full post. And I had a motorcycle, and we used to
tool around all through North Carolina on that bike, used to go up to Raleigh-Durham. I
liked it; I liked it a lot. It was a military town, but I’ll tell you what, we say this even
today, it was probably the best four or five months of our lives because here I was a
second lieutenant, I was a member of, effectively, a country club. You’d go to the
Officer’s Club. Everybody on-post, every enlisted man saluted you. You could go into
the—virtually the whole place was airborne qualified, so there wasn’t a matter of there
was legs and jumpers, wasn’t like that. We went to bars and had a good time. It was
great, it really was. I liked everything about it. Even to this day, when you say Ft.
Bragg, I think of 82nd, I think of Special Forces; I love the place, really. I liked it better
than Benning. Benning as a town, Columbus, Georgia, as a town, because there’s so
many people there for training, that’s not their job. They’re there to learn to do
something to go someplace else, so unless you’re part of the cadre or the teaching units,
you know it’s temporary. Whereas at Ft. Bragg, that’s your duty station, you know,
you’re company commander of a unit. So I think it has a little more permanence to it
than did Benning, but I liked it.

RV: Do you think that Lieutenant Urliccson had anything to do with you getting
that Headquarters job and kind of continuing on as that?
RM: I have no idea.

RV: Have you ever thought about that?
RM: I have no idea. I just don’t know. There was just a handful of us. Out of
our company of 160 people, I think six of us got the 82\textsuperscript{nd} Airborne Division, and it was—
now see, some people didn’t want it. I mean, I had people say, ‘Oh, man, that’s terrible.
You’re assigned to a TOE unit.’ And I said, ‘Yeah, but the best of the TOE units.’ See
82\textsuperscript{nd} had—I’d lived in Detroit during the 1967 race riot, and the 82\textsuperscript{nd} had come there and
pretty much put down that riot with the best textbook case study ofriot control in Detroit,
Michigan; 82\textsuperscript{nd} Airborne Division, they still teach it. Excellent stuff. And so they had a
reputation that I was kind of aware of, plus I knew I’d get to jump some more. I felt very
fortunate, and I had a lot of other friends that got duties like Ft. Huachuca, Simacorp, a
lot of different places like that. But for an infantry officer, I didn’t think I could be any
better. Now I had friends at the 82\textsuperscript{nd} that were like platoon leaders, and that’s not much
of a job if you haven’t—the worst part about the 82\textsuperscript{nd} for me was that the 1\textsuperscript{st} Brigade was
getting a lot of the 3\textsuperscript{rd} Brigade guys that were coming home from Vietnam. They’d
already been in Vietnam a year when the 3\textsuperscript{rd} Brigade was sent to Vietnam right after
TET, that was Westmoreland. Westmoreland wanted the whole division, as part of his
206, he wanted the whole division, and Johnson gave him one brigade, and he gave them
the 3\textsuperscript{rd} Brigade. The 3\textsuperscript{rd} Brigade, they got them all over there, and they realized some of
these guys hadn’t been home six months, and that was the rule: you had to be home six
months. Had to send them back. And so the 3\textsuperscript{rd} Brigade, we started a year later, we
started getting some of those guys from Vietnam coming back, and virtually everybody
had two or three months left in the Army, and then they were out. And they were—they
had nothing to be a good soldier for; there was no reason for them to do anything but
screw up, and that’s why we had so many guys in jail, and that’s how many guys had bar
fights. It was so bad that if your unit were to go one whole month, 30 days without an
AWOL—

RV: (laughs)

RM: then your unit—yeah—your unit got the use of two helicopters for two
hours, and you could go out to St. Mere Eglise or to one of those nice drop zones, and
make as many jumps from a Huey as you could make in two hours. And then they would
have beer and steaks on the drop zone; your family could come and participate. It was a
real party atmosphere. And because we were a Headquarters group, we had maybe a
little better soldier than the other ones did. We had all the transportation companies, and
I was in charge of the motor pool for the whole brigade, and we had all that stuff. So we
had a little bit better soldier than a lot—we did have as many of the hardcore 11 Bravos,
perhaps, that had come home. And so we didn’t have a lot of AWOL, so we got the use
of the choppers a lot, and that’s why I got to make so many jumps. But it was an
interesting time and a good duty. I just enjoyed every minute of it, and we’d go to the
Officer’s Club on Sunday nights for that buffet, it was like two bucks all you could eat.
Nice buffet, and you get to wear your uniform. Or you didn’t wear your uniform. Either
way, you had to dress up though, it was kind of—and we had the big New Years Eve
party at the parachute packing shed and got to wear my dress blues. Only time I ever
wore them. It was just a nice—for a young man to have that responsibility in a real
STRAC unit like the 82nd Airborne Division, and your wife pregnant, even though I was
going to Vietnam, it was a good time. It really was.

RV: How long did that last when you got to Bliss? You’ve got Alex there, but
here you’re counting down.

RM: We’re really counting down exactly, and that probably lends itself to why I
didn’t take it as seriously as I should have. I didn’t ever study outside of what I did in
class. It was starting to become inevitable now.

RV: Did you talk to Alex about going to Vietnam while you’re at Bliss? Do you
remember saying anything to him about that?

RM: I don’t remember, but I suppose I did when I would baby-sit. Sometimes
Maxine would want to get away, and I’d just kind of sit with him. I remember watching
the—I remember watching the Final Four on the Saturday afternoon—Providence,
Jacksonville, St. Bonaventure playing. Must have been UCLA, too, I suppose. I
remember Bob Linear was playing for Providence—or for St. Bonaventure at the time,
and I remember—I think we probably talked about that kind of stuff, crazy kind of way.
RV: What about you and Maxine, what were you telling her? What were you all
talking about?
RM: I don’t recall that we talked a lot about it while I was at Bliss; it was mostly
just have a good time and enjoy each other. We had a lot of parties. There were so many
of us that were going, we had parties every Saturday night. And we had—see this again
was kind of like MATA in that we had majors, and we had I think majors and lieutenant
colonels, so we were in class with them, so there was no ranks. I was second lieutenant,
and my best friend was lieutenant colonel, but we didn’t even address each other that
way. We were in civilian clothes on the parties, and we had some great times with this
sort of thing. I can remember Maxine, we went to this one party, and she was dressed in
this—she had this belt, it was a belt with a bunch of peace signs on it.
RV: Oh, yeah?
RM: And I thought to myself, ‘Well, I wonder how’—I forget the major’s name,
but there was a major, I said, ‘I wonder how he’s going to react to that?’ He was fine. I
think we all sort of—we were all going, and so the fact that we acted kind of crazy and
that we took it less seriously perhaps than we should. I don’t remember there being any
discussions, political talk or anything like that. I don’t remember us ever having a
discussion about whether we should or whether we should [not] be there or anything like
that, other than that was during the Parrot’s Beak incursion, and when the Parrot’s Beak
incursion happened, all of my friends all came over because Nixon was going to address
the nation that night and saying, ‘We’re going into Cambodia.’ Not, ‘We’re going in—
we’re there.’ And I remember them all, all my buddies coming over, and we watched it.
And that was the first time we really talked about whether the war was being expanded
and whether that was a good idea or not. We all were much in favor of it because all the
things that Nixon said made sense to us, and that is, we’re going after COSVN, and if we
get it, it’s going to change the outcome of the war. We were kind of the opinion, ‘Well
damn, let’s do it, let’s get them, let’s get it over with,’ you know? ‘If this is a good
military strategy, then let’s do it. Why didn’t we do it a year ago,’ kind of thing. But we
also knew, and as we were watching that show, we’re watching Nixon talk, we knew the
units going in, and we knew that probably 75% of our OCS class were going in on
Parrot’s Beak because the timing worked out just right. They weren’t as fortunate as we
were to have had all that time training, and that would have been their units. So we were
concerned about our buddies and stuff. That’s about the only time I remember ever really
saying, ‘Man, this is war, and this is going to escalate it.’ And then of course, Kent State
happened just a few days later, and I remember us talking about that.

RV: Do you remember what was said?
RM: Yeah, we were upset about it, I mean, we were upset about the deaths. We
were not in any way supportive or saying, ‘They deserve what they got,’ or anything even
close to that because we were all, again, remember who we are. We’re all college
graduates; we were just on the campuses of our own universities, one year before that
we’re getting out of school. So we’re very sensitive to the turmoil on the college
campuses in America, and it was a really sad thing. And we also knew how scared you
can be as a National Guardsmen because I’d seen that in Detroit. I’d seen the National
Guardsmen at the race riot shooting people, you know, innocent people, while the 82nd
Airborne Division on the other side of town was putting the riot down with not even a
shot fired. So we knew that you start messing with National Guardsmen who are
weekend warriors, were scared to be there, and you’re going to have problems. It was
inevitable there would have been something like Kent State, but we felt bad about it.
There was no feeling of, as maybe there was in some parts of the country, that they
deserved what they got. Nothing like that.

RV: What did you personally think about the anti-war movement, at this time,
before you went over?
RM: I respected their right to demonstrate, respected their right to be against the
war; of course, we had family members that were part of it. But I also had pretty much
made up my mind that… maybe it came a little later, it certainly came when I was first in
Vietnam, that I would never be part of it, as long as their were American soldiers still
serving. I was very upset with the Winter Soldier Investigation and those things that
would come in ’71, February ’71, while I was in Vietnam. I just made up my mind that I
would never be part of that. I don’t know that I knew about VVAW at that time.

RV: That was my next question.

RM: I don’t know that I knew it existed. I think I learned about VVAW, at least I
was conscious of it during the Winter Soldier Investigation of ’71, which took place in
Detroit. And my wife was sending me clippings about that, so I knew about that. I don’t
know that I knew about—I suppose *Stars and Stripes* may have carried some articles
about it while we were in Vietnam, but I don’t really remember that much about it.

RV: Any thoughts on any other American turmoil going on domestically, and
then I have something in mind militarily I’m going to ask you about. But Civil Rights
Movement splintering, kind of going in different directions, the Stokely Carmichael
faction, what about all this other stuff going on? Did you all feel like the United States
was held together and we’re still okay, yet there’s this problem, or was there something
else going on?

RM: I was more aware of that sort of thing while I was in college. Once I got in
the Army, I think I was in my own world. And I think I—because all my friends were in
the Army at that point, I think—I can remember this, I’ll give you an example. ’69, in
November of ’69, there was a big demonstration at the Veteran’s Day, and my unit, the
82nd Airborne Division, was assigned to go to Washington for riot duty for the anti-war
demonstrations. And I didn’t go because my unit, because I was in the Headquarters
Company, I didn’t really have a platoon as such to go. And I’d just gotten back from
Turkey, and so they didn’t send me. I stayed back as a—and then I was OD during that
time. And I remember it because it was right about the time that the University of Texas
played the University of Arkansas in the 1969 football game to determine the National
Championship. It was the game that Nixon went to, and after the game—Texas won the
game, and he went into the locker room and declared Texas the National Champion, even
though Penn State with their new coach Joe Paterno (laughs), that’s sudden, was also
undefeated. But the President of the United States says, ‘You’re number one,’ you’re
number one, right? And I remember watching that, and my sister-in-law, Maxine’s sister,
had been in Washington at the demonstration and was coming down to visit us. And I
remember her coming in the house there, and I was in my fatigues, and she looked and
saw my 82nd patch. And she said, ‘That’s the guys that gassed me!’

RV: (laughs)

RM: And I said, ‘Yeah, probably.’ And she was also pregnant at the time;
Maxine and her were both pregnant. We always say that’s probably why my nephew is
as strange as he is to this day.

RV: Because of the gas from the 82nd?

RM: Yeah, probably. My point on the football is I was more concerned about that
football game than I was that demonstration.

RV: I see.

RM: I was in my own world, and I couldn’t see beyond it because I think the
futility of seeing beyond it. What good does it do me to be so concerned about the big
picture when I am in the picture myself? I think that’s the way I felt.

RV: What about your parents’ feelings about you going over to Vietnam? What
did you talk about with them?

RM: Didn’t talk much about it. Well, for one thing, they came down to visit us in
El Paso to see their first grandchild, and my sister whose husband had served in Vietnam,
he left her right about the time my son was born, so she came down to visit us, too. That
was a good thing, not a bad thing, so we were not sad about that because he was a
complete jerk and went to jail, as a matter of fact. But he had served in Vietnam. I don’t
recall that when they were—they came to visit us, that we even talked about Vietnam.
We talked about them being grandparents, and we talked about how—and I think we
talked about, I may have said something to my father about, you know, making sure that
he set sin for me, so to speak, for the next year. That sort of sticks in my mind, but we
didn’t talk much about it. After Bliss, we’d had, I think I had two weeks before I had to
go to Vietnam, and so we drove back to Michigan from Bliss, and we stopped along the
way at my great aunt and uncle’s house in Oklahoma and at my grandmother’s house in
Missouri and showed off the new baby. And then had to get back because Maxine had
decided that she was not going to live with either parent, she was going to set up
household herself there in Michigan, and she’d be close by with the parents, but she
wanted to live by herself. So we had to do that, and then I left. It was a really hard time, that part.

RV: Do you want to talk about that?
RM: Yeah, my memories of it are a little blurred, but I remember we didn’t take Alex to the airport; we left him home.

RV: You’re flying out of Detroit?
RM: Flying out of Detroit. It was weird because we were walking down the aisle, I mean, down the—towards the planes there, and I recall former Governor Romney, who was now in the Nixon administration as the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development. The first secretary of Housing and Urban Development was coming at us, and I had worked for him on his campaign, I mean, I didn’t work personally for him, but I was a supporter of his. And he had just gone through, you know, he’d run for president in ’68, or tried to become president and hadn’t. He got into this problem with having said he was brainwashed by the generals when he went to Vietnam, and that pretty much destroyed his campaign. He’s a good man, a real good man. And I was in my uniform, and he stopped and shook my hand and asked me where I was going, and my dad was there. And my dad started talking to him saying, ‘My son’s on his way to Vietnam,’ and he wished me good luck and all this stuff and hated to see me go and all that thing. So I remember that happening, and then I went on down, and I remember getting on the plane, and the plane sitting on the tarmac for a long time. And I was sitting there, and I could still see sort of through the window, that was back when the planes came very much up the window. I would see through the window and see Maxine and my dad there, and I remember thinking—they had these headphones, and I remember trying to, trying to feel good about the moment, and I couldn’t think of anything good. And I remember Bill Cosby was at the top of his game as a comedian, and they had a CD—(chuckles) CD, an album of his playing there, and I remember listening to him and trying to laugh. And he was always a favorite of mine, but there was nothing funny about anything he was saying. We were going to fly from—see, I was by myself; I was going to fly to San Francisco and then fly out of Tan Son Nhut. But it was early in the morning; I think it was the day after Memorial Day, or maybe it was the 25th or 26th of May, something like that. Must have been about the 25th because I think I served 15 days less than a year, and
I came home on the 10th of May. But I remember it being real hard. I remember Maxine and I slept down in my parent’s basement the night before because they were going to take us to the airport the next morning, and I think my mother stayed with Alex. I don’t remember saying goodbye to my mother in the airport, so I think I said goodbye to her at home. It was hard. It was really hitting home then, and it wasn’t about dying. We never really talked about that; I think we both had it in the back of our minds, but it wasn’t about that. It was about being gone. I think I would have felt the same way if I was having to go to Germany for a year and not get shot at and be away from my wife and son. It was about being gone more than it was about the danger associated with it. I think I had a lot of confidence in my ability, and I think Maxine had a lot of confidence that I’d come home, but there was something really uncertain about it. But just the misery of being away, saying goodbye to a three month old was hard.

RV: Yeah. Did you tell Maxine there at the airport, ‘See you later.’?
RM: Yeah, we’ve never been good on goodbyes, so we just said, ‘I’ll see you soon,’ and I knew we’d get together in R&R. Didn’t know when that would be. We started talking about it and planning about it and writing about it almost immediately. I was going to meet in California, I was going to meet a bunch of my buddies from DLI, from the Defense Language Institute. Guys that I’d gone all the way back, some of them, to basic training, so I knew a lot of them. And so that was going to be good, that we’d be together on our way over, and that happened.

RV: Anybody say anything to you, good or bad, on the airplane from Detroit to San Francisco?
RM: No, I don’t remember anything on the airplane at all. I remember when we… there was a road that ran between Oakland and Travis AFB. I don’t remember exactly too much about it, but I remember that there were demonstrators with signs on the way to Tan Son Nhut.

RV: To Travis?
RM: To Travis, yeah, excuse me. Tan Son Nhut, that’s next day. On the way to Travis and those same demonstrators, not the same people, but the same demonstration was still there a year later; I do remember thinking that, how unique that was.
RV: Were you still in your own world, or did you see this and take this personally, or what did you think?

RM: I don’t remember taking it personal. I don’t remember that. I remember that I—I don’t remember ever being overly upset about that. I remember thinking how ironic it is that some people do that and some people do this.

RV: Again, intellectualizing about it, analyzing it.

RM: Yeah, yeah. I don’t think I carried it so far in my thinking to say, ‘Oh, what a great country to live in because they have the right to do that.’ That’s the next step. You don’t need to think that way; you just look at it. I think it bothered me more when I came home. I know it bothered me a lot more when I came home than it did going. Going it was just I was part of that world. I was about to enter a whole other world.

RV: What was it like leaving Travis, what was the mood on the airplane like?

RM: Oh, it was—when we first took off, I don’t remember there was any big feeling about anything. I remember we had, there was a Monopoly board, Monopoly game on the plane, and we played Monopoly for like 10 hours or something. We flew from Travis to Hawaii, and I remember in Hawaii, they kept us from—they wouldn’t let us in the terminal; we had to stay out of the terminal. They said that there was demonstrators in the terminal. I do remember that, both going and coming. So we had our own place that we had to be, and then we went from Hawaii to Clark AFB in the Philippines. And I think it wasn’t until the Philippines that it set in, what was going to happen.

RV: To you? Set in to you?

RM: To us, yeah. They told us it was about a two hour flight from Manila to Tan Son Nhut.

RV: What did you feel, do you remember?

RM: Yeah, I remember thinking, ‘Oh, shit, this is the real deal now. This is the real deal.’ And I remember when they told us, ‘You can look about and see the coast of Vietnam,’ I remember looking out and not seeing anything that looked any different than anywhere else. I didn’t see any gunfire; I don’t know what I thought I was going to see. We landed in the morning, I do remember that. I think it was around noon, and there was
no—we didn’t land under a sea of bullets or any of that kind of stuff. It was just like any other airport, except there were a lot of military planes around and all that.

RV: You knew your assignment as you were heading over there?

RM: I knew I was going to be MACV. I didn’t know what in MACV. I knew I would probably get a MAT team, but I didn’t know where in the country that I would go. And that took a lot of the time between Manila and Vietnam, we talked a lot about that with each other, about what we hope would happen, where we wanted to go. Everybody wanted to go to the Delta because the Delta in 1970 was pretty pacified. Nobody wanted to go to I Corps, but chances of going to I Corp weren’t that great anyway because the Marines were still up there, and they were using their CAP teams and stuff, their Combined Action Platoons. There weren’t as many MAT teams up there. There was also the possibility of getting a staff job in Saigon. MACV, what the heck? MBA! Finance, hey, that’s me!

RV: Right.

RM: So I was kind of holding out for that. We knew that the MAT teams, even though we’d been trained, I knew the Army could screw up again because they could train me and give me all that language training and then send me sitting behind a desk in Saigon. So I think I was thinking that maybe that MBA would show up somewhere in the database. But I don’t even remember then, we landed, and we were in Saigon for a couple of days waiting for assignments. We had some briefings and things, and we looked good; we had our tan uniforms, and I remember it being so damn hot. Oh, my goodness. Because remember, I’m leaving Detroit, Michigan at Memorial Day, so it’s still—snow’s gone, but that’s about it. It’s still cold up there that time of year. I had never experienced heat like that because even my time at Ft. Dix, I mean my time at Ft. Polk was in the fall, my time in Ft. Benning was in the winter, my time at Ft. Bragg was the summertime, but Fayetteville is not that hot, you know?

RV: It’s hot, but it’s not tropical Saigon.

RM: Right. So I’d never—I couldn’t believe it, I got off that plane.

RV: Was that your first impression?

RM: The heat and the smell.

RV: Describe the smell.
RM: I can’t even describe the odor. It was unreal; it was just like no smell I’d ever smelled. A lot of writers, a lot of diaries and things about Vietnam talk about the smell of death. Not in Saigon, not getting off the plane, I mean, it’s the smell of putridness. It’s the smell of sewage. It’s the smell of nuoc-man. It’s all those things kind of hitting a Westerner’s nose. I just couldn’t describe it. It was not pleasant, but I’m not sure that it was necessarily unpleasant. I mean, it wasn’t like, oh, what’s that beautiful smell? But it wasn’t something that you say, ‘Oh, my gosh.’ I think the heat was more repulsive than the smell, but I do remember the smell. And I don’t have any stories of looking out the window like Oliver Stone and seeing coffins with flags on them or body bags. None of that.

RV: Nothing like that.

RM: It was nothing like that. We just landed, and we just—we went to the barracks there in Saigon, in the MACV compound, and we waited around. And they’d say, ‘Okay, you don’t have to be back until such and such,’ and so we went into town. I do remember going into town, still in uniform and just couldn’t believe it, all those motorcycles and mopeds and everything. It was pretty amazing. And I remember they had American food for us; we could get burgers and stuff like that. They had an Officer’s Club, so we were able to go to the Officer’s Club. All waiting for these assignments to come down. And then I remember getting my assignment, and it said, ‘Phu Nhon,’ and I had no idea where that was. Said, ‘District Headquarters, Mobile Advisory Team, 38,’ and I was going to go there as the Assistant Team Leader. The two officers, the team leader, there’s two officers and three NCOs on each team. So you got the team leader, who would be a captain, then a lieutenant, usually a first lieutenant, although I was still a second lieutenant, second lieutenant assistant team leader, and then a heavy weapons NCO, a light weapons NCO, and a medic. That was the team. And I didn’t know where Phu Nhon was, and someone said, ‘Oh, shit, that’s up in the Central Highlands, you don’t want to go there.’

RV: Who said that? Was that—

RM: I don’t remember.

RV: Someone who had been there before?
RM: Somebody who knew the country. You still didn’t want to go to the Central
Highlands. I didn’t know much about it, except they said it would be cooler there; that
was kind of neat. And it was, I mean, essentially. But a bunch of my buddies got the
Delta, and we all wanted the Delta, and they got it, and I didn’t. So that—
RV: Were you upset?
RM: Yeah, yeah, I was upset, but I didn’t know why I was upset. I was upset
because somebody said the Highlands are a bad place to be. I knew about Kontum; all of
our, in OCS and everything, you’d talk about places like An Khe and Kontum and Ban
Me Thuot, I knew about Ban Me Thuot. And I knew about Pleiku. I said, ‘Where’s Phu
Nhon?’ And they said, ‘Oh, that’s about 40 klicks south of Pleiku.’ And I didn’t like the
sound of that because I knew about Pleiku; I knew about the 4th Division. They said,
‘Oh, that’s over by Ia Drang, that’s on the edge of the Ia Drang Valley.’ I knew about the
Ia Drang Valley; I’d studied the Battle of the Ia Drang Valley five years earlier, you
know? Knew all about that, and that’s where I was going, so I was not a happy camper.
RV: Did they tell you were going to be working with Montagnards at that time?
RM: Yeah.
RV: What were your thoughts on that?
RM: Well, that appealed to me. They said, ‘You’ll need an interpreter, they don’t
speak Vietnamese.’ And I thought, ‘Well, I wasn’t real good at that anyway (laughs).’
RV: (laughs) ‘I didn’t study that.’
RM: Yeah, so it didn’t make any difference. And then they said, ‘But before you
go to your assigned place, you’re going to go to Nha Trang.’ That was the II Corps
headquarters for USARV, not for MACV but for USARV. MACV was in Pleiku. They
said, ‘You’re going to go there’—
RV: Could you spell that out, that acronym?
RM: USARV is United States Army Republic of Vietnam, and it’s sort of like the
American part of the thing, and then there’s the MACV part, and of course MACV’s over
all of it. But they said, ‘You’re going to go to Nha Trang first, but before you even go
there, you will go to a place called Di An. D-I A-N, I saw it on your map there. ‘Di An,
right outside of Saigon, not too far from Bien Hoa, Bien Hoa Air Base for advisor—in-
country advisory school.’ And so we went there.
RV: All of your—

RM: For two weeks. All my buddies, all the guys going to the Delta, didn’t mean it was where you were going. We were going to have two more weeks of training in-country. So we went to Di An. D-I—do you see it?

RV: I see it. Two words.

RM: Yes, two words. And it was a two-week program as I recall. We slept in the barracks. It was reasonably secure they told us, even though they had guards at night and all that. But they told us that we would have two weeks of solid training, and what they did at the Di An school was they taught us all of the weaponry that we would be teaching the Montagnards, the PSDF. And I guess the ruff-puffs—oh no, not the ruff-puffs, they had M16s. I don’t know—they taught us all those weapons even though not everyone there was going to have the kind of assignment that I did. So they learned the Browning Automatic Rifle, and we learned the M1 Garand, and we learned the Thompson submachine gun.

RV: Was that weird for you?

RM: Yeah, absolutely. We’re talking World War II weapons here. I’d never seen any of these weapons. The Stevens Single Shot shotgun, the BAR, let’s see, what else did we have? I guess that was it. Oh, the M1 Carbine, small. And that these would be the weapons of the People Self-Defense Forces, the PSDF, which was like you had to be at least, you know 60 years old to be one of those guys or under the age of 12 or something. I mean, it was like the far end of the extremes. Everybody else was in the Regional Forces and Popular Forces except for those guys.

RV: Were you told this then? Did you know?

RM: Oh, yeah, we had a whole thing on what the PSDF was, and we studied about the Montagnards and everything.

RV: What was your reaction to that?

RM: ‘Whoa, this is going to really be some kind of an assignment because I mean, what happened to the M16s, the M60s and the M79s?’ My guys have got M1s and M1 Garands. I remember having a heck of a time trying to learn how to field strip an M1 Garand because it just wasn’t natural for me. I was pretty decent by that time at M14, had M14 all through OCS. M16, was pretty comfortable with that, still not as
comfortable as I would get. So, I remember being there, and that was two weeks, and
that was pretty good duty. Pretty good duty, we liked that. And all of us were still
together, like I say, some of us went all the way back to basic and were still together.
And then we flew to—then we got our duty assignments, and I remember them flying us
to—I was by myself now. Nobody else was going to Phu Nhon; we all broke up. And
then I was put on Air Vietnam, and I flew to Nha Trang.

RV: Right there on the coast, and what did you do there? It’s the headquarters.
RM: It was processing, processing. I spent about three days there. Oh, it was
beautiful. Went swimming in the South China Sea. My first taste of combat was that
night, although it was kind of—you had the 120 mm rockets, they rocketed the Officer’s
Club, and everybody scattered, including me. That was kind of scary.

RV: Had they told you what to do in case of a rocket attack?
RM: Yeah, but they had told us where to go, and at the time, I was really scared
because we were getting shot at. But I noticed that there was a whole lot of other people
that didn’t even pay attention to it. They said, ‘Oh, those damn 120s, they never hit
anything with those.’ And they were launching them off of the rockets, they’d lay them
on a bamboo runner and fire them off, and they don’t know where the hell they’re going
to go. That’s what all these old guys that had been there awhile told me.

RV: What does it feel like there, that very first taste of combat?
RM: Well, it was nothing compared to what it would be, so at the time it scared
me. And I remember it was, this is a bookend for me because this was my first time
being shot at, and I was at the Officer’s Club in Nha Trang, and I was watching a
Philippine band doing James Brown, I Feel Good.

RV: (laughs) Wow.
RM: It was actually pretty good, too, but it didn’t—when the rockets came in, you
know, I was under the table. And I remember thinking at the time, ‘Well, how do these
people put up with this?’ I thought this was what combat was going to be. Little did I
know what it would really be, but it’s a bookend because the same exact thing happened
when I went home a year later. I was in the Officer’s Club in Nha Trang, only the band
was Korean.

RV: And not doing James Brown.
RM: Not doing James Brown, but doing something rock ‘n’ roll. I don’t remember, ‘We gotta get out of this place if it’s the last thing we ever do.’ Popular songs like that, and we were rocketed. And I didn’t even move.

RV: I was going to say, what did you do?

RM: Didn’t even move. Didn’t want to get up, had a good seat, had my beer, had a burger, and I didn’t even move. And I watched all the new guys scatter (laughs).

RV: (laughs) Did you think back, ‘Wow, that was me?’

RM: Oh, yeah, yeah, that was me a year ago. It was funny that way.

RV: What’s it like to sit in a foxhole there that first night, or wherever you are?

RM: Got under the table, but it’d be like getting under the table over here at the Student Center. It was a big Quonset Hut type building, you know, had pretty good size to it. But yeah, I remember thinking, ‘Well, I’m here. I’m here.’ But I kind of relied on the people, what were the guys that were kind of still not under the table saying, ‘Oh, don’t worry about that, it’s just 120s, they never hit anything.’

RV: Were you thinking, ‘Wow, but one could, I mean, one could have my name on it coming into the room?’

RM: Yeah, I don’t know that I thought that, but I certainly, you know, that’s true. But no, it was not something that I enjoyed, and I thought, ‘Well, we’re starting now.’

RV: Had you been issued weapons yet?

RM: Yes, we were issued weapons in Saigon, so we took them to Di An with us, so yeah, I had. But didn’t have any ammo, just had an M16.

RV: An M16, 45?

RM: Yes.

RV: So from here, how long were you there in Nha Trang before you processed out?

RM: Two or three days, and then they said, ‘You’re going to Phu Nhon, but you gotta go to Pleiku first.’ So I flew to Pleiku. One of those planes, it must have been that one, and that may have been a Chinook. I may have ridden a Chinook from Nha Trang to Pleiku because what I remember is that I was on a plane with a whole bunch of Montagnard women with baskets and pigs and chickens on the Chinook. And it smelled in that place, man, oh man. They were throwing up, sick. And I do remember that flight,
and then I spent a day in Pleiku, briefings. I think an overnight there. And then the next
day we flew from Pleiku on a Huey down to Phu Nhon.

RV: This might be a good time to ask you, and we can also stop in just a bit, but
did you understand or did you think about the bigger picture here? I know you’re
concentrated on where you’re going on your assignment and where your buddies went,
but did you think, you know, what did you think about the big picture? Southeast Asia,
the United States being there, were you there to stop communism? Were you aware of
these kind of thoughts, or did you have any of this going on?

RM: Didn’t have any of it at that point. At that point, I become—I bought in
completely to my role. That was because it had been taught to me at MATA, it had been
taught to me at Di An, in Nha Trang the few days we’d had briefings at every stop. And
we were told that the American Advisory Effort in Vietnam was now going to win this—
enable the Vietnamese, excuse me, to win this war. And remember at this time, there are
less than 200,000 Americans in Vietnam, and there’s only two or three units. The 4th
Division, which is the main division in this province, is there at Pleiku, and they’re ready
to go home. They’ve already been announced, this is May, June, and they’re going to go
home in October. Some of them have already redeployed, so they have told us that
within six months, there won’t be any Americans in this whole province, and that’s going
to be the way it is in all of Vietnam. There won’t be any American units left before my
tour is up. And it’s going to be up to the ARVN to do this, and you are going to be what
helps them do that. So I bought in completely to my role in that respect. It was almost as
if I ceased to be an American soldier. I could have been an Australian soldier in that
respect. I was going to take my training that I had learned so much, and I was going to
help them help themselves. And I bought into it, but I don’t remember thinking of it as
being particularly an American thing at that point. It was more of, this is my job, and
now I’m going to go out and do it, I’ve been trained to do it.

RV: Had you heard any rumors or any talk about Vietnamization and it’s success
or not success or, ‘Wow, lieutenant, you’re kind of fighting a hard fight here. This is
going to be difficult,’ or what had you heard?

RM: No, never thought that it was going to be difficult because we were going to
an area that had good pacification in a lot of the areas. We had been told how to measure
pacification, results of pacification. We’d practiced filling out our little punch cards, IBM cards, we knew how to do that. We knew the questions to ask to determine what pacification would be or how we could determine whether or not a village was pacified.

RV: Can you explain that, what was that?

RM: Well, it was a series of questions about contacts, about how often the VC had been there in the last however many weeks it was, about how long the village chief had been in office or had been in power, crops, how the crops were doing, whether or not you could go there at night versus during the day. A series of questions like that that you had to go through a bunch of demographic things. Population and all that, and you had to answer questions about sanitation and how many people were still… whether or not there had been medical problems. Spinal meningitis was a real problem in the area, and you had to kind of measure that and see how often that had been in. Whether your medic teams, whether any MedCAPs had been through with the nurses out of the 37th evac there at Pleiku, and they had those programs. So you had to answer all these questions, and you had to then fill out these little cards because the cards would go into the IBM 360s I guess they were and processed.

RV: And to all of you then, this was accurate? It made sense?

RM: No. No, I have to say—at this point, yes, I’m ready to go. As it turned out, we did a lot of those card filling out—filled out a lot of those cards without ever going to the village; it was too dangerous. And I use to say to people that wanted to know whether it was pacified or not, I’d say, ‘Would you go sleep there at night? Would you go in that village and sleep at night? You want to know what’s pacified?’ I remember Senator Harris came down; I remember Senator Harris, he was the Congressmen—Senator from Oklahoma, and he was a real anti-war guy, and we got to take him around. And I remember the colonel, who I didn’t get along with very well up in Pleiku, saying we were going to go to all these pacified villages and show Senator Harris. I say, ‘Pacified?’ They said, ‘Well that’s what the report said.’ I said, ‘Yeah, well, that’s not what I put in my report.’ I said, ‘Let’s go there, you want to know if it’s pacified? Let’s go there at midnight tonight. You want to go there?’ And they didn’t want to go there; they didn’t want to take the senator there at midnight because it wasn’t pacified. The
difference between a pacified village and one that’s not is whether you can sleep in it at night; that was my rule because the VC would come around at night.

RV: Right.

RM: And during the daytime, everything’s pacified. Well, not everything, but most everything’s pacified during the daytime, at least for the first six months of my tour. So, I remember buying into what we were going to do, that we were going to measure pacification, and then we were going to take people out, take the RPSDF troops, teach them how to set up ambush patrols outside of their village. And we were going to do some good things I thought.

RV: You believed at the time that Vietnamization was a good thing, that it would work?

RM: Well, yeah, I sort of remember thinking, and this is where it gets a little difficult because you know, I know so much more about the war now than I did then. But I sort of remember thinking, ‘Well, yeah, what do you mean Vietnamization? What a silly term for a war in Vietnam.’

RV: Really?

RM: Yeah.

RV: What should have it been called?

RM: Well, it should have never have been called Americanization for one thing; it should have been Vietnamization—it was Vietnamization in ’62 and ’63 and ’64. We made it Americanization in ’65 and ’66 and ’67, but we should never have not been Vietnamizing the war, I mean—

RV: Because it already was.

RM: Well, it should have been if it wasn’t. It certainly was for the advisors; we had an advisory effort through that whole period, so for me it was always Vietnamization. I just thought it was kind of a silly term to be talking about like that. And I remember, let’s see, I’m trying to think of what I knew about Ap Bia or 937 Hamburger Hill because that happened in ’69; that happened while I was in—March of ’69 while I was in OCS. It happened right after Nixon was elected or right after he was inaugurated. We had heard about Vietnamization, that was the—going to be the Melvin Laird, General Abrams idea, and then Ap Bia comes along, and it made the news because Kennedy took it to the floor.
of the Senate and criticized General Zais for his zealousness in trying to get his third star, which was wrong. I mean, that was the wrong motive. So I sort of remember that, and that sort of slapped down Vietnamization. They were saying, ‘Well, if we’re going to not do it like we used to do it, and we got a new president and a new COMUSMACV, why are we doing this? Why are we playing like we’re going to hold geography and then giving it back the next day and losing all these men in the process?’ So I sort of knew about that. But I do remember when I finally got flown down to Phu Nhon, I do remember talking—I was going to replace Lieutenant Silver, and he was a first lieutenant; I was still a second lieutenant. I was hoping to make first lieutenant soon. And I remember knowing that he was my replacement, and so I sat down for a debriefing, and he just scared the hell out of me.

RV: What did he say?
RM: Oh, he talked about all the contacts they had had. He’d served in Korea and in Vietnam, so he had had—I always wondered how that happened, why he had served in both places and he was only a first lieutenant; he wasn’t a captain. He was ready to DEROS. But he and his sergeant, his sergeant, and I have forgotten his name. But his sergeant just scared the daylights out of me about all the enemy contacts that they’d been on, on the operations that they’d been on. And he said, ‘We got one’—this was like I came in on—I may have my days of the week wrong, but it seems to me that I got in there on like a Sunday night or something, and he said, ‘And we’re going out next Tuesday, and you can go out with us.’

RV: In two days?
RM: Out in two days. Out simply meant, this was a district compound, district headquarters surrounded by about 400 RF/PF troops, and then the PSDF were in all the villages. But we had a—and then in the inside of that compound was an American compound made up of two MAT teams, five men each and a district team, made up of a major, an RTO, an S2 who was also the Phoenix Program.

RV: Okay.
RM: And then on each team you had what I described earlier: two officers and two NCOs and a medic. So there was about 15 Americans and then this group of four,
around four, probably somewhere between 300 and 400 Vietnamese slash Montagnards, mostly Montagnards.

RV: Did that make you nervous at all? Here you are, 15 Americans out in this pretty remote place?

RM: Yes, particularly after—and we were right on Highway 14, right on Highway 14, midway between Ban Me Thuot and Pleiku. And right down there was an engineering compound right east of us that was responsible for building, maintaining and doing mine sweeps, morning mine sweeps on Highway 14. And when the VC would put an anti-personnel or an anti-tank weapon and blow up a Lambretta full of Montagnards, it’d leave a big hole in the highway, and the engineering unit would—American engineering unit would come out and fill it up again and pave it out and asphalt it. We built that highway. I say we built it; I think we built it originally, I’m not sure that the French built it, I think we built it. And so after hearing Lieutenant Silver’s stories, and yeah, I was pretty concerned. That’s where I would sleep every night, unless I was out in the field on an operation. That’s where we would leave from to go everywhere. We had a chopper pad, we had a little Quonset hut, dayroom kind of thing where we all ate. We had a Montagnard cook, we had house girls, we had a little hooch, we had the roof sandbagged, but we had no defensive bunkers for the Americans. It was ringed by—between us and the highway, on our side was open lands, open grounds. Behind us going back east was where the, sort of a horseshoe, and we were the opening to the horseshoe, and it wasn’t even defended. I do remember thinking that, and right on the edge of our inner compound was this single wide trailer that had a few sandbags, some 55 gallon drums of sand around it and a couple sandbags on top, and that’s where Major Major, our major, our district advisor lived. Then we had a long, little hut thing where we all lived, and we all had little rooms in there. And I remember thinking, ‘We’re not even defending the entrance.’ That was my first impression, that we’re not even defending the entrance. So I asked Lieutenant Silver about that because I was going to take his room when he left, but they put me in another room for a few nights. I think he was going to be there two more weeks. And I said, ‘What about the entrance?’ And he said, ‘Well,’ he said, ‘Most of the action, most of the fire fights, most of the enemy contacts take place out, not here.’ He said, ‘We get mortared once or twice a week at night,’ but he said,
'We’ve never really felt the need for anything at the entrance of the road coming into the compound off of Highway 14.’ And I made up my mind right then that as soon as he leaves, that was my first order of business was to build a bunker above that trailer. We would build it on the front and above, so we’d have an elevated firing position at the entrance to the compound looking out over Highway 14. That was my mission; that was what I was set to do.

RV: How big of an area, in general, was this entire compound would you say?
RM: Probably a mile square, I would say. It was probably, you know, like maybe 50 yards on the inner circle and then maybe another 100 yards out to the district and then beyond that, another mile. You can see a picture of it if you log onto the Ron Milam Collection, the very first five minutes of the video is that compound. It’s shot from the bunker that I built, and then there’s a picture of me at about the six-minute mark, of me on top of that bunker as we are building it, looking out over the compound.

RV: How many indigenous forces were there?
RM: About 300. Well, of the indigenous, I would call that the PSDF. Probably none in the PSDF in that compound because the PSDF were confined to the villages and the hamlets outside of the district. It was ruff-puffs in the district itself, and they all lived in bunkers on the other side of this U with their families, with their women and children, which will become a real problem in about nine months.

RV: Okay. Did Silver take you around and just kind of tour you, you know, show you everything?
RM: Yeah, he was real proud of it. Took me around in the jeep. Had a pet monkey.

RV: He did?
RM: He did, and the monkey had gotten real wild.

RV: You mean a real monkey had gotten real wild?
RM: It was a wild monkey that they had tamed, but it was starting to bite people, as wild monkeys would probably do.

RV: Yes.
RM: And he, on either the first day or the second day, he said, ‘We gotta get rid of that damn monkey,’ and I thought he meant take it back out to the jungle. And I
remember he drove me out to the edge of the—we had a landing strip, it was a dirt
landing strip for the Cessna 172s, we called them headhunters, that would fly in, and
whenever we went out on an operation, it was the MAT team leader’s job to go out on the
night before the operation and fly where we were going to be operating from to see if we
could pick out terrain and this sort of thing and to also preplan our artillery fires and stuff
like that. So that was behind the compound on the backside. And so Lieutenant Silver
had been talking about this monkey, and he said, ‘We gotta get rid of that damn monkey,’
and I just figured that meant let him go, and let him go back to the jungle. And he drove
me out to the edge of this, at the end of this runway, and the sergeant whose name I can’t
recall drove up in another jeep with that monkey. And they took it out there, on a leash,
tied it up, and then shot it. I didn’t understand that. I’d only been there a day and a half.

RV: What did you think?
RM: I thought, ‘Damn, what’s going on here?’ I was almost—I almost felt like it
was to let me know that the world I’m living in now or something, I mean, I took it as
somewhat of a bravado action on their part. I didn’t see it that way at all; I didn’t get it. I
didn’t know why, if you wanted to get rid of a monkey, you didn’t just let it go, and let it
find its own way back into the jungle. He killed it. Blew its brains out… first day,
second day, whatever. Lieutenant Silver was something else. He used to talk all the time
about he couldn’t wait to get back home, but he was sensitive to what was going on in
America, and as we all did in our last weeks in-country, we would talk about what we
were going to do when we got home. And Lieutenant Silver was going to buy a Mustang
Convertible; he was from New York, upstate New York, and he was going to buy a
Mustang Convertible. And he was going to get him a 38 Smith & Wesson and strap it to
the steering column, right down there where he could grab it because he didn’t think he
could exist without a gun.

RV: And you learned about all this in your two weeks with him while you were
there?
RM: Yeah, I learned most of this in the first 24 hours. He was a talker, and those
are the impressions that I remember of him. I would go out on operations with him; I’d
have my first combat experiences with him, and he was pretty good, although his
sergeant was even better. But he was a warrior, he was a warrior, and he was someone
who I always wondered what kind of an adjustment he would make back in the States
because it looked to me like he’d been there—well, he had been there a year, but his
sergeant who was, oh, he was so good in the field in all respects. His skills were just
excellent, map reading, compass, calling in artillery, everything; he was on the top of his
game, but he was on his third tour in Vietnam, and he was young.

RV: And he was leaving?
RM: And he was leaving also, he was going to—both of them were leaving, yeah,
their both time was up. So we were pretty much starting over. My team would be a
brand new team from top to bottom.

RV: I had heard that a lot of lieutenants—hear veterans speak about this
numerous times, read about it—they relied heavily on their sergeants to relate to the men,
kind of give them a feel for the terrain, the job, the whole thing, and kind of break in—
break you in—

RM: Break in lieutenants.

RV: Break in lieutenants and break in the lieutenants for the men.

RM: Absolutely.

RV: So here you are, and this is on a typical American thing going on out there,
but here you are losing a lieutenant and a sergeant.

RM: Yeah, lost them both. Silver was… he was something else. Like I say, I
wonder whatever happened to him because he was scared to go home. He was scared
enough to when he got home, he had to have gun, and he didn’t live in New York City;
he lived in like Albany or some place.

RV: Did he tell you he was scared, or you just—
RM: No, just, ‘Gotta have that gun, man. I can’t even imagine not having a gun
all the time.’ And I don’t even know if you could have a gun in upstate New York, but
he was going to have a gun strapped to his steering column with his Mustang.

RV: What did he tell you about your job? What did he say?

RM: Well, he was very… he loved the Montagnards, and he hated the
Vietnamese.

RV: Why?
RM: Because the Montagnards were really good soldiers, and the Vietnamese weren’t. It was pretty much that simple. His assessment of them, I think, was not correct. I think after two or three months I realized that I thought the Vietnamese and the Montagnards were good soldiers; I had no problems with them.

RV: Was it a function of leadership or in training them?

RM: Yeah. It was one of those deals where you sort of had to either like the Montagnards and hate the Vietnamese or the other way around because they didn’t get along too well with each other, so you sort of felt like the Montagnards were better soldiers. We had some great Montagnard leaders that were actually part of the ruff-puffs. The Vietnamese were smart enough to know that the success of the ruff-puffs in that province would be based on how many Montagnards were in leadership positions. And as reluctant as they were to put Montagnards in those positions because of the way they looked down on them, kind of like, you know, I mean, I don’t know, it’s a little different, but kind of like Native Americans being in units in 1890 here. They were good soldiers, but the Vietnamese I thought were pretty good too, the ones that I served with. He didn’t; Silver didn’t like the Vietnamese.

RV: What about the sergeant? What did he say?

RM: I don’t remember him having a particularly intellectual thought about them. He was just a tough—he was young. He was not, you know, he wasn’t the sergeant from kind of thing. He was probably 22 or 23 but a hardened, combat vet at that young age, and he loved, loved going out on operations and being in—he couldn’t get enough of it. And if there was an enemy contact, and a radio call came in, and somebody was under attack down at Plei Djereng, that was a little village south of us, he wanted to get in the jeep and go there. He was looking for action all the time, and he’d been there three years. I mean, he’d been there three years with the time off in between, as you’re required, I think six months. And he would openly talking about he didn’t know how he was going to handle America, and he hoped he could get back here soon. Silver didn’t talk like that; Silver, I think, was getting out of the Army, but the sergeant, he wasn’t getting out. And he was just a matter of, would they give him something that he could get through before he got back here? So I had these two guys both leaving, and like I say, they were good, and I would have liked to have served longer with them.
because I knew they were good and experienced, all of the things I wasn’t. But then it was just like a revolving door with new guys coming in.

RV: New Americans coming in?
RM: New Americans. Now, they were combat experienced. I had two new, once I took over the team when he left in two weeks, I ended up with an African-American light weapons man and an older sergeant, heavy weapons man, and a medic that were all pretty good, but that were all on their second tours of Vietnam and were all older than I was. They were all, I would say, probably close to 40 years old.

RV: Was that an issue?
RM: You mean for me being new and young?
RV: Yes, well, an issue on either side, was age a problem?
RM: You know, it helped a little bit that I had time before they got there. They were a little more combat experienced. By the time they got there, I was Phu Nhơn experience, and I had been shot at a couple of times, and I’d been ambushed on the highway a couple of times. So I had combat experience, but I didn’t know the extent of their combat experience because they were wearing 101st Airborne Division on their right shoulder and then MACV on their left, and one guy had an 82nd patch on his right shoulder, and one guy was with the 173rd, the Thundering Herd. So I knew the Herd had been in—he’d been in Operation Junction City, and so I knew about that probably they had had good combat experiences. I had had small, by the time they got there, I had been shot at a few times, and I’d been in one fire fight, but basically it was small potatoes compared to what I figured that they had been through. So I think that helped me, that I at least had been shot at; I had my CIB within the few weeks I was there, so I could wear that, and they could see that, and so I wasn’t looked upon as being as green as I would have been otherwise. But they were pretty good men, but they weren’t like Silver and this other sergeant in the sense of none of us, wasn’t anybody in that group that was as gung-ho as either of those two guys.

RV: How did you relate—what do you do about familiarizing yourself with the Montagnards and with the Vietnamese, the local Vietnamese. What do you do? Come up and introduce yourself, what do you do?
RM: That’s a good question. I remember going out into the villages that were close by everyday.

RV: By yourself?

RM: No, you never went anywhere by yourself, but we had a jeep; we had two jeeps, actually, assigned to our team, and we had a .50-cal on one and an M60 on the other that sat up above in the back, and I wasn’t supposed to drive, I was supposed to ride shotgun, and then one of the NCOs would drive me. And then the other lieutenant—the other officer would have the same set up, and then our NCOs pretty much took care of them, maintained them as Motor Pool. And then I had an interpreter, and a lot of times we put the interpreter on the M60 or the .50-cal.

RV: Why?

RM: I don’t know. They had to sit somewhere, might as well have them sit up there. And then we had sandbags in the floor of it to somewhat protect us from mines. And so we’d run up and down the highway to these various villages.

RV: How long would it take you to get to these villages?

RM: 15 minutes. My Thach was 10 minutes up the road, Plei Djereng was 15 minutes to the south. Those were the two that we went to a lot, and there were little villages off inside the road that we would go down trails to get to that were within a couple of miles of the highway, a couple of—probably two klicks, three klicks away.

RV: Did Silver say, ‘Here’s a map lieutenant, here’s where you need to go,’ or did he say, you know—

RM: We had a schedule of places that we would go to check these pacification issues and fill out these forms.

RV: Was the schedule set?

RM: It was set for the next week or two, I think, and this operation we were going to go onto was an actual operation in the sense that we would leave the compound by foot, and we would go out to a village that VC had recently been seen in. And the idea was to take a ruff-puff unit out—it would be a company operation—and that we would go out there and set up a CP in the village, and we’d spend the day there. We weren’t going to spend the night. We were going to go out by foot and then expected back seven or 8 o’clock that night. That was my first operation.
RV: Show of force or awareness?
RM: Yeah, you didn’t always know. These were not necessarily planned by us. Remember we’re advisors, and there is a Company Commander of the Regional Forces, and he would have a plan to go out, and we would go out, and we went along as the advisors. Now we’d preplan artillery fires, and we’d have all of our map there, and we’d have everything marked where we’d want fires if we needed then. And then we had the Cobra gunships on standby and F4s, and we had all those things all set. And so I got to go through the kind of the planning for one of these operations; that was the big job for us, is making sure if you get in trouble, you could call for air support. Usually Cobras, it was pretty hard to get F4s. We were sort of a populated area along that road, so we didn’t usually get F4s… usually, a little bit later we did, but mostly you could get Cobras in in about 15 minutes from Pleiku.

RV: Let’s go back to when you first got there, and you’re visiting the villages, and you’re with Silver and the sergeant, I presume. What do you do when you get into the village?
RM: They would introduce me to the village chief and say that I was the new. At that time I was the new Thieu-uy. I would become a Trung-uy very shortly, first lieutenant.

RV: Do you want to spell those for the—

RV: What did you say to these guys? ‘Hi, how’re you doing? I’m Ron.’?
RM: Yeah, I’d tell them through the interpreter, and then they would usually have just enough English to ask where you were from. They had heard about America, and ‘Nice to have you here.’ And then I’d asked them how long they’d been village chief, and they’d usually say a week. And I’d ask them if there were any problems in the village and that kind of thing, and then Lieutenant Silver would interrupt and say, ‘Oh, yeah, well they had VC, beaucoup VC,’ beaucoup VC. And they’d start talking, and they’d use their limited English on me, you know, let me know that they knew certain words. And they were always swear words.
RV: Yeah.

RM: And so we’d kind of have that kind of talk, and then they’d take me through the village, and if the village chief had an elephant, they’d be proud to show his elephant off. That was really a nice village if the village chief had an elephant; that was a big status symbol.

RV: How big is a village? Typical village.

RM: It might be 50 hooches, 50 bamboo huts, and those huts might have three families in them. There was what they called the long houses, very long this way, and then there was the shorter houses, all elevated up about five feet off the ground with a log ladder leading up to the porch and then the inside area.

RV: Is this what you expected to see?

RM: Well, I’d seen pictures at Ft. Bragg about it, so it was probably about what I thought it would look like, except that the people—it was amazing to me, all of the women were bare-breasted, and that was a little bit of a surprise to me. And the children, up until about the age of five, the children were naked, and then all the men wore loincloths. And even the PSDF Army wore loin clothes.

RV: What did you think about that?

RM: That was pretty strange, that was pretty strange. I remember when I saw *Apocalypse Now* in 1978 when it came out, I remember going with people who said, ‘Oh, my goodness, I never saw anything like that,’ and I thought, ‘You didn’t? That’s who I fought with, that’s how they dressed.’

RV: Did you ever have to get in a loincloth?

RM: No, but I did very shortly after I was there. I did have to become a member of the Jarai tribe, and I went through the rice wine ceremony that almost killed me… literally. They took me to this location.

RV: How long after you were there?

RM: I think this was after my first combat experience, so I was in combat on that Tuesday that we went out for the first time, and so I’d been shot at a few times. So I didn’t have my CIB yet because they had a rule that you had to be in combat for 30 days. You had to have combat experiences within a 30-day period, so I was eligible for the CIB, but I hadn’t been awarded it yet. They took me down to this village on a Sunday
afternoon, and I don’t know why that was a Sunday afternoon because we normally took Saturdays and Sundays off and dressed down in civilian clothes which consisted of blue jeans or shorts and a magazine vest with all the magazines that you could carry in there, that we had made in the village.

RV: So you took the weekend off?
RM: Well, often the sense of dressing down and hanging out, it’s staying back at the compound. And so they took me down to this village on the Sunday afternoon to participate in the rice wine ceremony, and they butchered a water buffalo for us.

RV: For you?
RM: Well, it was me, and there was at least one other new guy that were going to become members that day.

RV: Were you told beforehand that you were going to have become members of the tribe?
RM: Yeah.

RV: So you expected this.
RM: Yeah, because Silver and all those guys, their arms were full of bracelets where they had been awarded, become members of the tribe. But I didn’t know what I was going to have to do exactly; they sort of told me what I was going to have to do. But it consisted of eating the innards of the water buffalo, the guts, and they would—and literally they had butchered this thing, and it still had fecal matter in it and everything. And they would hold the intestine, and they’d run it like that and get as much stuff out of it as they could. And then they’d wash it in some water, kind of a thing supposedly to clean it, and then they chopped it up. And then you ate it, and they had sauces to dip it in. So it was raw intestine. And then they had some actual cooked things there and of course, rice and all these kinds of stuff.

RV: And you can’t refuse it.
RM: Oh, no, can’t refuse it. And you know, you’re sort of of the opinion, you’re thinking, ‘I’ve gotten all the shots that you can get,’ when I’m going in there, but you’ve heard about Hepatitis and all this kind of stuff. And you just know that you’re going to get something from eating all this crap. And then they take a—took a toothpick, about that size.
RV: And you’re indicating about four inches long.

RM: Yeah, about that long, yes. A long piece of—maybe it wasn’t a toothpick, maybe it was a—but it was about that long. And they broke it in half, and they put it on the edge of a 55 gallon drum of rice wine that had a reed going down into it as a straw, down into the bottom of the barrel. And to become a member of the tribe after eating and everything, you had to suck down rice wine until the top of that wooden straw floated or cleared. And I don’t know how much that is, in terms of 55-gallon drum that big around times one inch, but it’s a lot. And you start drinking it.

RV: Who does? Just you?

RM: Just me. That’s your job. And I start drinking, and I keep drinking and drinking, and I couldn’t do it all at once, so I waited a little bit. And you can start feeling that stuff work on you, and you just get absolutely blown away and sick. And I passed out, I mean, I don’t know over what time period. And when I came to, I had the Montagnard bracelet on my arm, my right arm. And I wore that Montagnard bracelet from having it been put on me in, this would be probably the first or second week of July of 1970, I wore that bracelet until 1997. Never had it off, and then I lost it in diving down in Belize. And my wife still has hers on her. Now she didn’t go through the ceremony. By going through the ceremony, I got one for my wife, and I put it on her when I saw her in Hawaii at R&R.

RV: Were you thinking about her during that ceremony?

RM: Yeah, I was thinking that she’s going to be a widow (laughs).

RV: (laughs) So alcohol poisoning and—

RM: Oh, and Hepatitis. I was sick for two days, oh, man I was sick. Everybody, they say everybody gets sick from this stuff. I don’t know if it was the food or the drink or what, but it was something that I had to do. Probably as dangerous a thing as I did while I was there, I never did that again. I didn’t ever eat that kind of stuff; I just didn’t. I made sure I didn’t because it really did make me sick.

RV: Well, why don’t we stop for today? This is a good place to stop, and we’ll pick up here next time. Thanks, Ron.