Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone and I’m doing an oral history interview with Mr. Richard Schaffer. Today is March 18, 2003. The time is about 8:40 AM Central Standard Time. Mr. Schaffer you are in Jamestown, New York and I am in Lubbock, Texas in the interview room in the Special Collections Library on the campus of Texas Tech University. Sir, let’s get started with a brief bio of you. Tell me a little about where you were born, when you were born and your childhood.

Richard Schaffer: Okay, I was born outside of Middletown, New York and that’s in Orange County, which is about fifty, sixty miles north of New York City along the Hudson River. I was born December 31, 1945. The last kid born in the old year. I actually made the newspapers for doing that.

RV: Did you really, you were literally the last one?

RS: Yes, yes I was from the area. You know they always do the new baby born January 1st you know always gets these prizes and all these things. Well, I got my name in the paper for being the last one born.

RV: Okay, okay. Did you grow up in Middletown or right outside Middletown?

RS: I grow up outside of Middletown, a little community called Johnson about ten miles out of the city, so basically a rural area. I’m trying to think back in the early days why we didn’t even have indoor plumbing in that area, just sixty miles north of New York City, its amazing.
RV: That is amazing.
RS: And I was about four and a half years old I guess before we got indoor plumbing.
RV: Was that common for the community?
RS: Yes, it was. It was a rural area, little tiny hamlets, crossroads, no centralized school system at that point, everything was one and two room little schools here and there. In fact the school I attended was, I forgot the district number but it was in Johnson, in a little hamlet of Johnson and we had primary class, which was like kindergarten today and then the next year you moved over one row as you went to first grade and then you moved over another row in second grade and another row in third grade and another row in fourth grade and let’s see. I think fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth you went to the next room, and again you moved over row by row and so I had the same teacher for all of my early training.
RV: Did you feel like you got a good education in that kind of system?
RS: Oh, yes yes, excellent education. Those of us that were a little bit faster did our work and listened to what the other kids were doing in the next row. We were given assignments to do but then the teacher went on to the next row to work with that group and there was a lot of interaction between age levels and grade levels and things like that so you tended to pick up on what the other kids were doing. By the time I completed sixth grade they had. Actually before we completed sixth grade they had centralized the school system, and were in the process of building a new school. So when I started seventh grade I started out in a new K-12 facility but that facility only had seventh graders on through tenth graders because in our area you had to go to school in, you had to contract with a high school. Our district did not have a high school, and so if you were on the north side of the township you might go to Porchervis. If you were on the other side of the district you might go to Goshen Central, you might go to Middletown. Some of the kids in the next village over even went into New Jersey because that was the closest high school.
RV: How many brothers and sisters did you have?
RS: I had two younger brothers.
RV: Okay, how much younger were they?
RS: The middle one was five and a half years younger and the other was about
seven and a half years younger.

RV: Okay, what did your parents do for a living?

RS: My father ran a feed store, feed store hardware store kind of thing for most of
the years that I was, for all of the years that I was at home. My mother stayed at home
until I was older, and then went to do some book work and stuff at the feed store and then
on to a dry cleaning establishment.

RV: How about yourself, did you work in your youth?

RS: Oh, yes. My wife was commenting the other night the stories I used to tell as
a pre-teenager pedaling my bike around the community doing odd jobs for little old ladies
that wanted something done here and there. You know a little gardening, a little lawn
work or whatever and I would go do those things and then I used to do some work in the
feed store, unloading train cars of feed and things like that, working on different farms.
I’m just trying to think I--After I graduated from high school, do you want me to go on at
that point?

RV: Well, sure let’s talk a little about your high school, what do you remember
about your high school years most I guess?

RS: They were kind of fun, carefree years.

RV: Were you a pretty good student?

RS: Oh yes, I was on the honor roll, in the band, active in community kinds of
things, active in the church from a very early age. I think went to a local community
college after I graduated from high school. I graduated in ’64 and then went to Orange
County community college for two years and got a two-year degree in mechanical
technology and started to work for the telephone company in the area in the management-
training program and we had to learn all aspects. We were given a two-year period of
training on all of the aspects of the phone company. We all started out at different
positions and I started out in the lineman area, climbing telephone poles, stringing wires,
doing those kinds of things. And at the end of the summer basically decided this was not
really what I wanted to do with the rest of my life, and resign my position on a Monday
and finished out the work week kind of a thing and the following Monday in the mail had
my draft notice.
RV: Oh, really, how convenient.
RS: Yes.

RV: Let me ask you a couple questions before we get to your military service. Did your parents push you educationally; did they emphasize this completing high school and then going on to a higher degree?
RS: Not a whole lot. Neither one of my parents had completed high school. There was support to continue in higher education but I was. It was definitely not a “Well, you’ve go to do this” kind of thing. It was more like, “What do you feel comfortable doing and if you so desire, well we’ll help you as much as we can” kind of a thing.

RV: It sounds like you were academically ahead of some of your peers, yet you chose to stay in the area. Did you have aspirations to go elsewhere, to a larger college or were you satisfied with the community college?
RS: I was satisfied with the community college. At that point I wasn’t really sure what I wanted to. I figured I’d better develop some kind of skills for the market and decided that the local community college would offer that because their mechanical technology program you got AC and electronic fundamentals. You got the mechanical drawings and the machine shop kinds of things that I felt would be useful in the future.

RV: Were you particularly good at this kind of work? Is this what you enjoyed in high school? Were you good at the sciences and engineering type?
RS: Not so much the engineering as the technologies. You know doing the drawings, understanding some of the mechanical processes and doing some of the machine kinds of work. I used to really enjoy woodworking and things like that, so those were the things that I, and I got very high scores in those, even in high school I got a couple of awards for having the highest marks in the shop courses.

RV: So that, the community college curriculum fit right into what you were doing, what you liked I guess.
RS: And it would, and I felt it would kind of at least give me a marketable skill, and I wasn’t really sure at that point. There seemed to be so much out there in terms of possibilities and jobs and things like that, it was like the possibilities were almost endless, its like you could do anything, be anything, and I wasn’t really sure what I wanted at that point.
RV: Now, did you ever travel down to the city during this time period?

RS: Yes, in fact I met my wife at Orange County Community College, and she lived at Long Island and you know we’d been into the city to Yankee Stadium to games, and I had been as a child, driven in and out of the area and on the island, you know once I got my driver’s license and things, always in and out.

RV: What was your impression of New York City compared to Johnson?

RS: It was a whole other world; it was a whole other world.

RV: Okay, so by this time, when you graduated in 1966 with your degree, the war in Vietnam had really begun to take off. How much did you follow before this what American foreign policy was, what was going on in Southeast Asia or around the world in general?

RS: I was always kind of a history buff and I used to study the old stuff and I know I kept on the current events somewhat but I don’t think I had a real strong understanding of what was going on at that point yet. You know I was involved, still very heavily involved in the educational learning process, in meeting all the deadlines there and I kind of knew this other thing was going on but, and a lot of us used to joke that once you graduated you had a free ticket to go over to serve and what not, but I hadn’t formed a whole lot of opinion at that point.

RV: So you all were aware that there was a draft and that if you weren’t in school, I mean I guess that’s an obvious question but if you weren’t in school, you were going to go?

RS: Oh, yes, yes.

RV: Was that any incentive to you to try to beyond your two-year degree to go somewhere else to stay in school or were you resigned to this?

RS: No, that had nothing to do with it for me. It was, I know for many of the guys it was an issue. Stay in school at any cost kind of a thing but basically my focus was the two-year degree and I had that two-year degree and I had started working, and I had no responsibilities really at that point so after the summer of working and deciding oh this isn’t really what I want. Then resigning and getting the draft notice and that would have been, I would have been in the group that would have been the largest call up for the war. I think that was that October of, October ’66, I think that was. They called up like 54,000
and I would have been in that group to report, but what happened was once I had the draft notice and I had oh, probably thirty days to report. I was supposed to report at the end of thirty days and I just, I was like, “Well, this is a real shocker in a way.” And I thought, well I want to get some training out of this. I just don’t want this to be a two-year thrown into the meat grinder thing. At that point I became more aware of it and decided I wanted to get something out of my military time. I checked with different recruiters and I thought to myself I never was much about Navy and on the water and in boats and those kind of things, so I wrote that off. Checked with the Air Force and they were like, “Well, we really can’t do anything for you, there’s not enough time.” So I went to the Army recruiter. He got me into the testing program and I took some of the tests. Well I took all of the testing and everything and he came back to me and said, “You can do anything in the military you want to do except heavy artillery and heavy equipment operator.”

RV: Why did he tell you that?

RS: He said my aptitude just wasn’t there for those two things. He said, “You scored very high in all the other areas” and so then I did this real logical. I was like well, I would really like to stay as close to home as possible for as long a period as possible and so I was asking, “Well, what’s the closest training area to Orange County?” And he said, “Fort Monmouth New Jersey” and he said, “They have some really great training programs in electronics” and that was the area I was kind of weak in. I had the mechanics but I didn’t have the electronics and so I said, “Well, what’s the longest school you can get me in?” And he said, “They have an eight month radar, air defense radar repair school in Fort Monmouth, New Jersey.” He said, “If you finish your basic training by a certain date,” he said, “You will be guaranteed a slot in that school.” And I said, “Sounds great to me” and that’s what I signed up for. So I did. I signed up for three years and did my basic training in Fort Knox, Kentucky.

RV: How did your parents feel about this, going into the military?

RS: They didn’t say too much about it at that point. I’m not sure they had at that point really formed much in the way of opinion about the war. So I was, you know they didn’t say much. It was at that point my decision. I mean I was already, you know I was older than most who were drafted at that point I guess. You know, having two years of college already and I was a little older when I graduated from high school. I was always,
because of the way my birth date fell I started school a little bit later rather than earlier, and so I was always one of the oldest ones in my class kind of thing and so here I am already with two years of college and then getting drafted. I had already been out in the workforce kind of thing too and so at that point, I was trying to think what else I was going to say about that, but--.

RV: Well, let me ask you. You’re discussing the training options and it sounds like a really good deal for you. Did you think about the fact, or did the recruiter mention to you that you might go overseas to Southeast Asia?

RS: I don’t remember honestly. I’m sure that one of the things, you know air defense, where do you think of air defense radar? You know through northern United States, Alaska, you know, a variety of places, Greenland. You know the air defense system. I’m sure I thought my chances might be somewhat less of going to Vietnam by having that particular training, and what I was really focused on at that point was the fact that here was something electronic repair, this radar type of thing that would help me in the future for getting a job.

RV: Right, okay. Did you understand at this point or did the Army kind of help inform you of why the United States was in Southeast Asia?

RS: I guess their version of it. I must say that during my time in the military, during those years I felt very isolated from the news that the rest of the world was receiving?

RV: Why is that?

RS: I’m not sure. It was like we were involved in the everyday training. It seemed like there wasn’t the time to spend, you know reading up on thing. I mean I didn’t go get the newspaper everyday and check to see what was happening. TV access I think was somewhat limited. I didn’t spend a lot of my time in the day room in front of the TV kind of a thing and it was just like, you were dealing with your life at that moment learning all that you could in this training. Of course in the time of basic training there wasn’t a lot of times to rest and relax anyway I didn’t feel, and then afterwards then it was the eight months of air defense school and I must admit during that time I was off weekends so it was like working, and I had weekends off and I went home and you know was with family and my future wife and going out and enjoying life.
RV: Let’s talk about basic training, what was it like at Fort Knox?
RS: [Laughing] PT, PT and more PT.
RV: How did you adapt to that military lifestyle?
RS: I adapted I guess. I’ve always been adaptable to whatever situation comes along, but I didn’t like it but I understood that, hey I needed to do the best I could in this because this might ultimately mean survival. You know you were tempted to just kind of slough it off and take it easy, but and then in the back of my mind was no, you better really do this. And yes, the constant push-ups and the low crawling through the sand pits and all of that was hard, but you know you endured and of course some of the drill instructors, their concern was as they said was your survival. They didn’t care about how you were feeling at the moment but they wanted you to be able to react in certain situations. They wanted you to know what to do without thinking and I can see where there’s some merit in that.
RV: Did you achieve that do you think?
RS: Pretty much. I mean there was always a part of me that would think about what I was being asked to do, but there was another part of me that just said, all right, do it kind of a thing because they’re in charge and I’m not in charge and they’ve got a reason for this and you need to do it.
RV: How long did the training last?
RS: We had eight weeks of basic training.
RV: Okay, can you describe kind of what your typical day was like there?
RS: Typical day was get up early in the morning and fall out for formation and then back in again and then to the chow line and then start the physical training. You know the push-ups, the running, certain days were set aside for going out to the rifle range so we marched out to the rifle range and we qualified on the weapons.
RV: Which weapons did you?
RS: Well initially we qualified on the M-14s. That was in the days when they were still using M-14s. We also had, we went through maneuvers. We did night marches. They took us out on the field at night. We set up camps at night, slept out. You know had the meal line type of thing like it was on a battlefield. Dug foxholes, filled sandbags, set up perimeters and things like that. Learned how to throw hand
grenades at the hand grenade range. I’m trying to remember whether we finally did
qualify at basic with the M-16 or whether that came later on. I know I qualified on an M-
16 at some point but I can’t remember if that was done in basic training or not.

RV: Okay. What was the most challenging aspect to you?

RS: Oh, I think the, I think the marching and the maneuvers. You know you went
on long marches up hills and what not. There was an element of the, learning battlefield
maneuvers that was kind of exciting. So it was almost an excitement, a fun kind of thing
to be, and as a kid we grew up playing cowboys and Indians. So here you were out
playing again. I mean you were in the woods, you were in the fields, you were on
maneuvers doing things and there was a sense of excitement about that, at that age.
Nobody was using live ammo at that point. Some of the night maneuvers that we went
on, there was the one where you had to low crawl from position A to position B and they
were, and there was live fire and you had to go through the barbed wire. They had pits
located in various positions and they were detonating explosive charges, you know that
was kind of nerve wracking.

RV: How did you handle it?

RS: Got through it. Just sucked it up and got through it.

RV: Right, right. Tell me about your instructors, what were they like? Had any
of them been to Vietnam?

RS: Yes, a number of them had. A number of the drill instructors had talked
about their experiences, always in a harsh manner. Again instructing us what to do, what
not to do, why not to do certain things. And I remember going out on one of the night
maneuver training exercises, and we marched through the dark, got to this site. We were
able to see just a little bit, it was quite a dark night, it wasn't a moonlit night or anything.
We got into, we were standing in an area and we really didn’t know where we were, and
they started talking about smoking at night and so somebody in the training group lit up a
cigarette and you could see this little bit of a light and they lit more than one cigarette and
they were saying, this gives a sniper a chance to zero in on you, and all of a sudden the
whole are just lit up with rifle fire and explosives going off and then flares being up in the
sky and all of those things and it made quite an impact on you.
RV: Okay. What did they tell you about Vietnam, do you remember? You said they spoke of it kind of harshly.

RS: Yes, spoke about; you know it was a dangerous place. You know you really had to watch yourself, watch your step, watch what you were doing; be on the alert. You know you want to stay on edge all the time because little things might tip you off as to what was going on in an area.

RV: Okay. How would you rate the instruction that you got, was it adequate or above average?

RS: I was thinking that I could have used some more of it. I would not have wanted to go out in the field with what I had.

RV: You’re talking about out in the field in Vietnam?

RS: Right, right. I mean I would not have wanted to be in the infantry based on just the eight weeks of basic training. And most people were not. Most people were sent on to some other you know advanced infantry training unit if that’s what they were doing. There was a lot of hurry up and waiting as we were going through the basic training. It seemed like we did a lot of that. We hurried to a location and then you’d sit there and wait or you’d stand around and wait.

RV: Okay, so after Fort Knox when you finished basic, you went to Fort Monmouth?

RS: Yes, Fort Monmouth, New Jersey.

RV: How much time in between did you have?

RS: I think I had a thirty-day leave.

RV: Okay. And when you went back home how, did you feel yourself different or was it different going back home to Johnson or what was that like?

RS: Quite frankly I can’t remember.

RV: Well, it must not have made a big impression then.

RS: So there’s a lot of things in my mind that are kind of gone.

RV: Okay, so when you got to Fort Monmouth why don’t you tell me about that, this is an eight-month training.

RS: Eight-month air defense radar repair training program. What they did was, we were trained five days a week. Most of the instructors at that point were civilian
instructors. They were representatives from, well I think we had military instructors in
the beginning because we were dealing with basic stuff, and every two weeks you had a
phase test, and if you passed the test you went on to the next segment. If you did not pass
the test then you could repeat that two week segment in hopes that you’d pick up what
you missed and at any point you did not pass a phase test then that’s where you’re
training ended and you were usually assigned into some group that could utilize what
expertise you had been able to gather at that point. We had guys that dropped out after
basic electronics or we had guys that dropped out after they got through the radio repair
section, and those persons tended to become radio repairmen or operators in the Army. It
was, that training was extensive. I remember we had lab sessions where we had to wire
things up and make them work. We had de-bugging session where we had to figure out
what was wrong with this little electronic circuit why it didn’t work. We learned how to
use a variety of meters, oscilloscopes volt meters, amp meters, the whole thing. In the
beginning it was basic electronic fundamentals, then we went in, got into the radio
signals. Then we got into a variety of different types of radar, and finally got into the air
defense set up and how to troubleshoot equipment and keep it running.

RV: Was this mainly classroom instruction?

RS: Yes, classroom and lab time. They had equipment there for us to, for the class
to. Where you paired off or sometimes you worked in small teams or you know around a
particular radar set, and you got to learn what the equipment could do. You learned how
to operate the equipment first of all because they wanted you to know, I mean if an
operator called you in and said, “I’ve got this problem with” you need to know that the
operator knew what he was talking about. You had to become an operator and a
repairman.

RV: Okay, how did you do personally?

RS: Did very well. I enjoyed it, got through the whole eight months with no
repeats. When we, I was trying to remember, it seems to me there were like a hundred of
us that started out because they had two separate class groups, and when we finished at
the end of eight months I think there were fifty of us that finished.

RV: Out of the hundred?
RS: Out of the hundred, and we had picked up some people who had started before us but had been phased back but had picked up and completed it, so it was pretty rigorous training.

RV: Right. What was the typical day like there?

RS: Oh, get up in the morning at a fairly early time, at the crack of dawn. Fall out, do some physical exercise, go to meals. Go back, square the barracks away and then go to class from oh, probably 8:30 in the morning until 4:30 or five in the afternoon.

RV: Okay, did any of your instructors talk to you about Southeast Asia, going to Vietnam or was it more of kind of a general training courses that you were going through?

RS: Some of them did in a sense that, I’m remembering that when we got into the civilian technicians some of them had been over there representing their companies, and did talk about some of the, the battlefield conditions that your equipment would have to undergo and in terms of how to keep the equipment up.

RV: Do you remember what they told you about that?

RS: I know the humidity was an issue. Heat was an issue, dust, those kinds of things. And they had been over, so these representatives would have been there in the early years because by this time, well by the time I finished radar school I had already had a year in the Army, so.

RV: Right, this was fall of 1967?

RS: Yes, yes.

RV: At this point how much did you keep up with, or how much did you know about Southeast Asia, because the war’s just getting, the tempo of the war was growing.

RS: Right, the tempo of the war was just, you know, at that point had grown by leaps and bounds, but still again my focus was on the education I was receiving and I was able to go home most weekends. I knew what was going on. I knew there, I mean you got to see the nightly news at that point, when I was home, but again you dealt with it once a week kind of a thing, it wasn’t constant.

RV: Now, was there any talk amongst you and your classmates about going to Vietnam or were you expecting, like you were saying earlier going somewhere else in kind of NATO air defense?
RS: Yes, there was some talk but it wasn’t the same as basic training, because in basic training everybody was together, it didn’t matter. A few of us had the guarantee of the radar schooling that went through my basic training unit, but most did not so there the fear was when you finish basic training you’re going to an advanced infantry training unit and then for deployment overseas, and in the radar school it was not quite that, there wasn’t that mix of people and you were in a more technical kind of a setting and we just didn’t know at that point.

RV: What was the hardest thing about that eight-month training to you?
RS: Those were eight good months. When you say the hardest thing I’m not sure that I.
RV: Was there anything that was really difficult or challenging?
RS: I mean the training was challenging but it was, you know a totally different kind of a setting. You know, I mean we didn’t go out on war maneuvers and try the equipment out. We were learning electronics. We were learning the mechanics of this equipment. We were learning how to repair this equipment. You could see where in the future beyond the military this kind of training would be very useful and I wanted to make sure I learned it.

RV: Okay, so none of that learning was difficult for you, it came fairly easy to you?
RS: It came fairly easy, but we really worked at it, I mean we took books home in the evening and studied and planned. Studied for the testing that we were to undergo that type of thing.

RV: Okay, when you finished after eight months where did you go?
RS: Well, when I completed, my initial orders came through I was to go to Germany, and at that point I had been engaged and had talked to my future wife about getting married before I went over to Germany, then she would be able to go over with me we felt and it would have been an eighteen month or two year deployment and that would have taken up my time in the service, and we felt we could see a little bit of that part of the world together. So our plan was to get married and we went ahead and set the plans and then as the date drew very close, my orders were changed and I had orders to go to a unit in North Carolina. We went ahead and got married but I did not have the
thirty-days leave time that I originally applied for. I only got fifteen and so everything
was kind of in a rush and then went to Fort Bragg, North Carolina with a maintenance
battalion that did all kinds of maintenance. They maintained trucks, jeeps, some radio
equipment, really were not into radar that much.

RV: Were you given a reason why your orders were changed?
RS: No, just that the need changed. You know the Army’s need changed and
boom, so here you go.

RV: So when did you get down to Fort Bragg?
RS: Got to Fort Bragg in the fall of ’67.

RV: Okay, and how long were you there?
RS: And I was there I think until around the first of March, and once I got there
realized that the unit had been forming to go over to Vietnam but they had been there so
long that some people were rotating out. I mean after a couple of months of being there it
was, became came of obvious we weren’t going anyplace as a battalion, and finally I
moved my wife down to North Carolina so we could have some time together and she
came down in December and we had December and January and February and then
finally in February I got orders that I was going to Fort Benning in Georgia with a unit
that was forming up to go overseas to Vietnam, those orders were definite.

RV: So you knew you were going at that point.
RS: I knew I was going at that point unless they got changed.

RV: How did you feel when you realized that was going on?
RS: It was kind of devastating, it was like, oh gee I went through all of this
training, still to go to Vietnam.

RV: What do you mean, what do you mean by devastating?
RS: Well you know it had been. Here I’d had almost two years in the service at
this point, and it was like I hadn’t gone over yet and it was kind of like the shorter you
got, the less likely you were going to go type of thing, and you know I was married and
everything and didn’t want to have to spend time away from my wife and all of that. It
was really kind of devastating to get those orders and say, these orders read “For overseas
duty in the Republic of Vietnam.”

RV: Okay, how did your wife feel?
RS: She was pretty much devastated with it too. She was worried, she had kept up I think more with what was going on than I had because she had more time in the home and what not.

RV: How about your parents?

RS: I think they were somewhat worried about it. We had been living, I’d always kind of been on my own and done my own thing anyway, so, but I know they were worried about it.

RV: How about your brothers?

RS: They were still young. I mean I don’t know if they really knew what was going on.

RV: So what did you do down in Fort Benning, what kind of training did they have for you to prepare to go over to Vietnam?

RS: Most of the time it seemed like we just hung around waiting.

RV: Really?

RS: Yes, I don’t remember pulling a lot of duty down there. The weather was horrendous. I mean we got there. I did have leave time home so it seems like I, I guess I must have spent the month of April, part of April home on leave and then reported to Benning in late April, early May and the weather was just unbearable.

RV: In what way?

RS: Humid, you know you go outside and walk around and the sweat would just pour out of you, and you’d come in and take a shower and you’d sit on your bunk and it would still pour out of you, there was no getting cool.

RV: Maybe that was good training for Vietnam.

RS: I always said the weather in Vietnam was better than the weather in Georgia.

RV: Really, wow.

RS: I’m sorry [laughing] . . .

RV: Okay, so were you with a repair unit here at Benning?

RS: Yes, what they were doing in Fort Benning they were forming up a group of aviation support detachments, and we were, and the whole group that was in that area were aviation support detachments. They were collecting men to be in those groups. They were putting supplies together, equipment together to go over. It seemed like I
pulled very little detail duty down there, and finally after having been there for oh, about 
a month we, a group of us did get sent up to Fort Monmouth, New Jersey TDY for thirty 
days to learn the ground control approach radar systems that they were using in Nam. 
They felt we all had the, we had learned the most difficult of radars, but they wanted us to 
learn the particulars about the GCAs. So we went up and spent thirty days in training 
with civilian instructors. Again learning the equipment, how to troubleshoot it, how to 
set it up, how to align it, all those types of things.

RV: Was that come easy to you as well as the rest of it?
RS:  What's that?
RV: Did this come as easy to you as the rest of it had to this point?
RS: Yes, this was mainly a refresher of radar and the GCA was not as involved as 
air defense, so.

RV: Can you tell me a little bit about the GCA and what that was, kind of 
describe what, this is one of the things you would be doing in Vietnam.

RS: Yes, it was a ground control approach that was contained in a small unit that 
would fit on the back of a truck. It was like a two person little air-conditioned unit they 
had two radar screens. It was operated by air traffic controllers. It could be dropped into 
a landing zone anyplace they wanted to put a small airfield in, or if they wanted to have a 
helicopter landing area they could install one of these. They could airlift it out of there if 
they needed to. If you were moving to a new site, you could take it out, set it up in a new 
area, align it and within a relatively short period of time you could be controlling the air 
traffic in that area.

RV: When you say aligned what do you mean?
RS: Alignment, you’ve got to make sure that when it says the plane is one mile 
out it really is one mile out. You’ve got to do the procedures that allow it to function in a 
given area when you move it.

RV: Is it dependent upon the geographic area, the mountains, hills, that kind of 
thing around where this airstrip would be?
RS: Yes, you have to make sure that the equipment is reading properly, its more 
than just putting it in place, its putting it in place and then making all the proper
adjustments on the equipment so that when it says you are a mile out you are a mile out
and when it says you’re half a mile out that’s where you are.

RV: Kind of calibrating it basically.
RS: That’s a better word, calibrating, yes the calibrating.
RV: Now was this the only thing that they said specifically you definitely would
be doing in Vietnam or were there other things that you had trained on at Benning, and
maybe at Bragg, saying that this is what?

RS: Well the units, the way the units were, the detachments were being formed
they had like thirty or forty of these detachments. And each detachment, I believe had
thirty-two men in it. There was a commanding officer who was usually a major or
higher, and he was the only officer. It was a really odd setup, it really was a detachment.
We weren’t a battalion, we weren’t a regiment or anything like that, we were a
detachment. So you had a high ranking officer who was the commander, and then there
was a fairly high ranking non-commissioned officer, an E-7 or an E-8 who was the
second person in charge so to speak, and then there were two radar repairmen and there
were two generator people and I think the rest of the unit was air traffic controllers as I
remember. There were like sixteen or more air traffic controllers because you had to
have different shifts. Some of them were visually trained so they would sit in a tower and
look out and we had portable towers, again one man kinds of units where you set up on a
pod or pedestal or whatever and you had all the radios in that little unit, an air condition
unit, could visually see the air traffic in the area, and guide the pilots in and out of a
landing zone or an airstrip. Then part of the air traffic controllers were radar trained,
where they could guide in on a radar screen and they would sit inside, would have no
visual contact with the aircraft but would guide them in with the electronics.

RV: Okay, did you feel ready to go after thirty days training on this GCA?
RS: Yes, we pretty much covered all the basics that we needed to. The instructors
were good, and the instructors seemed to enjoy working with us because we already
knew radar so they kind of breezed through the real basic stuff and got into the nitty
gritty that they had to deal with. I remember getting lots of compliments. I mean those
of us that went, and there were quite a few of us that went, we were always getting
complimented by the instructors about how much we knew and how much they enjoyed
working with us to get through this.

RV: So you returned back down to Benning after your thirty days up there.
RS: After my thirty days, yes.
RV: Okay and then, how long did you have before you shipped out?
RS: Oh, it seems like we might have been there another month or so.
RV: And you left in July?
RS: It was July of ’68 when we finally went over. We all boarded the airplanes
and it seemed like they were, I couldn’t really remember whether they were C-130s or the
bigger ones.
RV: But they were not civilian, they were military planes?
RS: They were military aircraft, we boarded them at Benning.
RV: Okay, what was that like for you, leaving the United States? Leaving your
wife, your family and knowing you’re going into a war zone?
RS: It was kind of scary, it was kind of scary. We, of course I’d already said my
good-byes you know a couple of weeks before but when we were loaded in and here was
some of the equipment on the back of the aircraft and we’re all in these little jump seats
sitting across and kind of crammed in. We flew to Alaska and then we got off the plane
for a short stretch and then back on again and flew to Japan and then got off for a short
stretch and then back on again and then finally into Vietnam.
RV: Where did you fly into?
RS: I’m trying to remember whether it was Tan Son Nhut or Bien Hoa. A little
fuzzy on that as to which one of those two we actually did come into.
RV: What was the chatter like on the plane going over? Was everybody more
solemn or was it excitement or what do you remember?
RS: There was a sense of solemnness, that we were really going to get to go over
there and we didn’t, you know, didn’t really know what to expect.
RV: Did the Army tell you, here’s some things you need to make sure you do in
Vietnam, here’s the way you treat civilians, here’s the way?
RS: Oh, yes we had the training and things like that, and then once we got there
the first couple of days were orientation as to what to do, what not to do kinds of things.
RV: Okay, do you remember what they told you, just in general what?
RS: Not offhand. It’s all kind of a blur. I have an image of coming off the plane. I have an image of being herded into a sheltered area and then being put on buses and taken to a. I want to say an in-country area, an area where people coming into the country were de-briefed as to what to do and what not to do, and I remember there were wire screens and a heavy wire screen and metal bars and stuff on the windows and I thought, oh, we are in trouble, and because they were telling us you know, they’re on there for a purpose and that’s to keep people from throwing grenades and things into the bus. And we thought uh-oh, we are here.
RV: Right. How many men were there with you when you arrived?
RS: Oh, golly. Like I said there was at least twenty or thirty ASD units, and we all left at the same time. There was more than one planeload of and so we all landed at the same time and we were all brought off the planes and into the holding area and then into the buses and then off to the reception area, so there were hundreds of us.
RV: Do you remember your first impressions when you stepped off the plane what Vietnam was like?
RS: It was hot. I remember thinking, wondering what kind of a strange place this was and hearing the sounds of war in the distance.
RV: Such as?
RS: Rockets exploding in the distance, gunfire subdued in the distance. I mean it could have been miles away but we were hearing it. It could have been troops undergoing training exercises for all we knew, but you know you could hear the sounds of war.
RV: How did it make you feel?
RS: Nervous, very nervous.
RV: How about your colleagues there, the other guys in the unit, were they feeling the same thing or?
RS: Oh, yes.
RV: How was morale?
RS: I don’t think the morale was too bad at that point. We hadn’t experienced anything really devastating. I mean we were there and we didn’t know what the expect at that point but we knew we were in a war zone.
RV: Right. Did you have any clearer sense of why the U.S. was there, what you
were fighting for?
RS: Oh, there was the Army line you know, but.
RV: What was that?
RS: You know that we were there fighting communism, but it was always kind of
generalized and as the days grew into weeks and months why you really began to
wonder. You know why, and who was really in charge of this and did they know what
they were doing?
RV: Really?
RS: Yes. Yes, I always had this sense that you know we should talk to other guys
in other units and maybe some of the units that were on the line and some of the units that
were out in the field, and you know you had so many restrictions. You couldn’t do this;
you couldn’t do that. You know you had to wait until you were fired upon before you
could fire back. You know there were certain situations that were, you know there were,
instead of reacting to what was happening you were just to dig in and not do anything. It
was like, how do you win a war that way kind of a thing? There were just way too many
restrictions and whether it was just guys talking or whether it was actually a reality, you
weren’t sure but you suspected that it was reality, that you were not allowed to do certain
things in certain situations.
RV: Was that the common talk amongst the guys in your unit? Was this your
personal feeling or was this something that everybody was kind of feeling?
RS: I know it was my personal feeling but I know we did talk about it at times
with other guys in the unit, and with other guys that you came in contact with.
RV: Okay, well why don’t we continue. Tell me about after you finish your
debriefing. Do you remember what they told you about the Republic of South Vietnam?
RS: Oh, I remembered things about, oh gosh, it seems like there was instructions
about water, instructions about people and contact with people, what to do, what not to
do, insects, those kinds of things, personal care that you were supposed to do and all
those kinds of things. Its all kind of back there in oblivion, minor details that.
RV: So were did you go after this debriefing session? Did you stay on base there
for a few days or were you?
RS: We were there for a few days, and I know some of our equipment was coming in by boat but some of it we had with us and it seems to me after about a week or so then we went out, at that point I was with the 322nd Aviation Support Detachment, and our assignment was to go to Quon Loi out near the Cambodian border. I’m trying to remember what the highway was that went up through there, it was Highway 1 or that Highway 13, I can’t remember.

RV: Highway 1 ran north/south along the coast, so probably 13.

RS: Okay, then this must have been 13 I gather.

RV: How soon did you get out to Quon Loi?

RS: Probably within a week after we got in country.

RV: Okay, what were your duties there at Quon Loi?

RS: We were to set up our area and run the control tower.

RV: Okay. How many people were there at Quon Loi do you remember, overall?

RS: Overall, it seems like there were several thousand. They had a PX. They were large enough that they had a little PX on the base. What they had done, it was an old French rubber plantation, and they bulldozed the center out and they had a landing strip. Probably I can’t remember specifically the length of the landing strip but my guess would have been, it would have been in the fifteen hundred to nineteen hundred-foot range. They could bring in the C-123s and the 130s. Our guys ran the air traffic control tower there, did a little bit of work on the radar there. Most of the time we were there we spent setting up our area where we were going to live.

RV: Okay, meaning your quarters?

RS: Our quarters, yes, getting the huts in order and digging foxholes and you know setting up the area, filling sandbags. We built a shelter for rocket attacks and things like that.

RV: Okay, what were your quarters like, or can we call them quarters?

RS: Rustic at best. They were usually made out of plywood and two by fours with some screening around and then you threw the tent over the top. So they were pretty rustic.

RV: Okay, how many men would be inside one of these facilities?
RS: Oh, I guess we probably had fifteen of us maybe inside, seems like we had
two for the whole unit you know, kind of a thing. It was pretty rustic living quarters.
RV: Okay, did you have a personal footlocker or?
RS: Yes, one of the old Army wooden plywood foot locker kind of things to keep
your stuff in.
RV: How about shower facilities and things like that?
RS: Oh, really rustic, and I can’t remember. It seems like at Quon Loi we had like
fifty-five gallon steel drums and put a couple of those up on a roof, the water truck came
around, you filled them up with water and they were connected by piping at the bottom
and that became your shower. If you wanted hot water they had those submersible gas
heaters, which were. It was a real trick to light those things without losing your eyebrows
or your hair or your mustache or whatever.
RV: So you would have to light them and then submerge them in the water?
RS: Yes, they were submerged in the water and there was an external gas tank and
you open the cock on the gas thing and it dripped gas down inside, inside this piece that
was underneath the water. And then to light it, you’d have to drop a match down in
through this little hole, while you’re trying to see. Did the match go out on the way down
or not? So you’re kind of looking over this little peephole, and every once in a while
you know it’d baboom, you’d blow one of those things up. Guys would come out with
singed eyebrows; I used to hate to light those things.
RV: Did you prefer to take a hot shower or was one of the cold showers fine with
the humidity and heat?
RS: Cold showers were fine, but you know it was nice to have a hot shower once
in a while. You know, whenever you, when the water tanks were full and you were, guys
were getting ready for shower time, that’s when you went and lit the thing, so.
RV: Okay. Tell me about the amenities or so-called amenities that you had on
base there. You said you had a PX, how about the chow hall and things like that.
RS: Yes, we did have a PX and there was a central chow hall area. We, most of
us you know you’d get a meal here or there maybe at the chow hall. A lot of what we did
was we’d requisition C-rations or the long-range patrol rations when those came out later
on, and packages from home and that’s what we basically lived off of. Meals at the mess
hall were kind of infrequent because it was out of our area. We were just assigned to go there kind of a thing and so we did more of our own cooking in a sense that we prepared our own C-rations and patrol rations and things like that.

RV: Okay. What was your typical day like there at Quon Loi?
RS: Again, well we didn’t, we didn’t do a whole to of PT at that point in time, but it was getting up and trying during the cooler parts of the day to do the digging that needed to be done, to do the foxholes and the shelter and things like that and sandbag our equipment. Try to make things somewhat livable conditions for us, and guys took their shift running the air traffic control tower and if the equipment was down then the two of us that were in radar repair, or, and the radar repair guys became the general repair guys. If there was anything broken. We weren’t just limited to the radar but if they had a radio that went out in the tower, they’d ask us to look at it and things like that. And so if, and if the generator stopped working they asked us to get the generator going.

RV: This is with the tower or on the base in general?
RS: On the tower, yes, if the radios in the tower stopped working, they had a problem then we would go in and repair those.

RV: What kind of shifts would you work? Were you on eight hours for four hours?
RS: We, as a radar repairmen you didn't have a shift. If the equipment was down you were working, that’s basically the way it worked. I mean if you worked around the clock because a piece of equipment was down you did it, and if you had three days off because everything was running fine, you had three days off.

RV: So how often did the stuff break down I guess is the question, how much were you working?
RS: Probably on a weekly basis there were things that were, you know if it wasn’t the radar set itself; a piece burning out in it or what not then it was the radio equipment or something, we’d go out and so you’d spend time working on that. So usually we working on something several times a week you’d be putting in a full, four, five, six hours straight of doing something, and then there were those occasions when, oh particularly if you were, if your transmitter went down on the radio then you would have to sometimes go other places to get the equipment, to get the parts you needed to replace.
it if you didn’t have parts on hand and you were supposed to. We had a parts trailer that
we kept an inventory of parts, but some times those parts were in short supply so where
you were supposed to have a couple of magnetrons on hand, which were part of the
transmitting system. Those tended to burn out after so many hours of usage, and if you,
you know you might have two on hand and one working in the unit, the one in the unit
burns out, you change it and get it up and running and now you’ve got to make sure you
order more parts. Well, maybe before the magnetron would come in, you’d burn the
other one out and now you wouldn’t have any spares and sometimes we got into the
situation where we had, we’d used up the spares, the equipment was down, now you’ve
got to go get the equipment back up again, and a lot of what we did then was you might
call one of the, like the ITT Giulfillen radar rep in Saigon and say, “You know, hey we
need this equipment. Our radar set is down and here’s the parts we need” and he would
try to get a line on where they had some in country, and then we would fly to wherever
that was to pick them up and bring them back and get them installed and that might take
you several days. So you’d, since we were connected to the guys that controlled the
tower, they could usually get you a ride out, whether it was a mail plane, whether it was a
courier plane, whether it was a Huey that just wasn’t being used at the time and the pilot
was available. You might fly from Quon Loi to Saigon or Vung Tao or China Beach or
wherever and pick up the part and it might take you two days to get to where you were
going and it might take you a day, day and half to get back again with the part, and you
might have to take the long way around just because, well the guy in the tower says I can
get you a ride on this aircraft to this location and from there they can get you back to your
home location and so we did a lot of that, I saw most of the country.

RV: Really?
RS: Yes.
RV: How often were you out trying to get the parts?
RS: Oh, I’d say probably at least once a month I was on the road trying to
scrounge up some parts.
RV: Did that bother you, did you feel like your job became that much more
dangerous when you knew you were leaving and kind of going, you’re either flying over
the country or driving down these roads?
RS: The drives were, seem to be more harrowing because you ran into convoys, you ran into delays, you ran into, you might hear, “Well, why is everything stopped, why aren’t we going forward?” “Well, there was an ambush up ahead you know and so they’re cleaning up” and later on you’d go through and you’d see the results of it kind of the thing. The flying wasn’t too bad, although you flew over areas where you could see the bomb craters, where you know the B-52s had come in and you know dropped their load on an area and those kinds of things. But flying around the country, you know, there wasn’t a whole to of worry. I think I worried more when I was traveling by motor vehicle.

RV: Right. What were the most common problems with the radar?

RS: Oh, the magnetrons burning out, they were the key biggie. Once in a while your circuit boards, at that point we had a lot of, we didn’t have a lot of tubes at that point. The magnetron was the big tube in a sense; it was probably one of the most expensive parts. Otherwise it was more, the circuit cards would get damaged, would overheat. A component might burn out in them or whatever. Once in a while a wave guide, which actually directed the output, the transmission of the radar set out once in a while and some of those were flexible pieces and they might get kinked as you, because you had to open up the equipment and pull it out, it slid out and sometimes putting it back, you know it would kink or something and then you’d have problems and have to replace the wave guide and things like that.

RV: Would you say that the radars were pretty reliable or was it a normally functioning piece of equipment?

RS: I think they were fairly reliable for the situation, which they were used. We didn’t move ours a lot. I know, eventually I got transferred from the 322nd over to the 359th. So then I moved to Phuoc Binh and we were there for a few months and then our whole unit was moved as a unit up to Camp Evans, and so we had to take our equipment out and so, you know we had to actually tear down the sandbags and all the protection we had built up around the equipment and then set it up in a new location at Camp Evans and operate at the airstrip there.

RV: Okay, of the three locations which one, did you spent more time at Phuoc Binh or at Camp Evans?
RS: I think I spent the most time at Camp Evans. In my mind it was like the last six months that where I was, and the first six months was spilt up between the 322nd and Quon Loi and the 359th and Phuoc Binh.

RV: Okay, did you remain with the 359th once you moved to Camp Evans?

RS: Yes. We stayed together at that point.

RV: Were your duties basically the same in each location?

RS: In each location keep the equipment running, yes.

RV: Okay, which location was busier?

RS: Toss up between Phuoc Binh and Camp Evans. A lot of helicopters at both sites, and at both sites we not only ran the airstrip, so that meant the incoming, you know the incoming mail plane, which was like a Caribou, the C-130s, the C-123s. A lot of those in and out, bringing troops in and out, bringing supplies and equipment in and out, but we also had significant helicopter groups, some of them with the Hueys, the Huey gunships and the some of the Cobra gunships also got to see a lot of those. There were literally you know, thirty, forty, fifty of those stationed right there, you know you open up your hut door and within visible distance would be twenty-five helicopters. And out air traffic controllers handled all of the flights of those in and out coordinated all of that.

RV: I’m sorry, you coordinated all of that?

RS: The air traffic controllers did, yes, which were part of our unit, our unit controlled all of that.

RV: And so you would just simply be one of the few guys keeping everything working.

RS: Keeping the equipment going, yes.

RV: Okay. On your down time did you hang out in the tower, did you try to get away from that unless you were needed there?

RS: Actually on down time pretty much hung around, because you didn’t know when they’d need you kind of a thing. So you’d hang out in the tower, you’d watch the guys, how they were, you know using the equipment, you’d learn how they were controlling the air traffic and once in a while you’d sub for them just for a few minutes kind of a thing.

RV: Right, right.
RS: But you got to really, you learned their job and that made you a better repairperson because then you would know. Once in a while you’d get somebody that just didn’t want to work that day, and they’d say the equipment was not working properly. Well, you could sit there and operate it then and you could say, “No, no, the equipment’s working properly” and you had to know, otherwise somebody would take advantage of you and sign the equipment down and then the brass would be on your case because the equipment’s not functional.

RV: Right, right. What were your quarters like at Phuoc Binh?

RS: They were pretty much the same. Actually at Phuoc Binh they were probably a little better because I think we had concrete floors and you know, two by four construction and we had metal roofs there. And then up to Camp Evans it was, it was like living in a slum. You know it was really, you know, it was really tough conditions.

RV: Did you adapt to those okay or?

RS: Oh, yes. You were there, it was like you know, it was strange because when you went to the some of the bigger bases, when you went back to Saigon and you went to Bien Hoa, at that time those people didn’t have their weapons. Their weapons were locked away in an armory that might be half a mile from where their barracks were and they would have barracks with hot and cold water and all of that and we had none of that out where we were.

RV: Did you ever have air conditioning?

RS: The equipment had air conditioning.

RV: That says a lot right there.

RS: You know because these little metal housing units, you could fit two men inside, like I said and then the one was, we had two of those, and one was the radar set itself with the two position radar screen and the radios and things. And then we had a repair little unit that was about the same size, it would fit on the back of a truck but we had them dropped on the ground. We had one of those that was actually had the bench and the test equipment and the one next to it had the spare parts in it, and those three units were air conditioned and the tower, which was a portable little tower about the same size was also an air conditioned unit.

RV: How tall was the tower?
RS: Oh, tall enough that you could stand up in it and then there was a seat that
was elevated up in it with a window so it looked like, you kind of image an airport tower
with the controllers looking out the windows, but it was only a one person position. You
could sit up on this seat, elevated seat in that and look around on all four sides. When I
was at Camp Evans we had it up on a three legged tower, it was three poles, like
telephone poles sunk in the ground, and wooden slats hammered across that was a ladder
getting you up to the top of this thing, which was way up in. I mean I say way up in the
air, if it was fifteen feet up in the air it was way up there I mean, you know it’s a long
way to climb the to get into position.

RV: Were you ever told that these towers might be the specific target of rocket
attacks or sniper attacks?

RS: No, it was a very safe place to be, because the tower was usually the highest
point on the airstrip and the enemy would use that as their site in. So that’s what we
always understood was that was the safest place to be was in the tower because they
didn’t want to destroy their marking; their zeroing in point.

RV: Right, that makes sense. Now did you ever have to pull guard duty on any of
these locations?

RS: Not really. I think there was once or twice. I think when we were setting up
in Quon Loi, I think there might have been one night and I know there was one night
when we were under attack. We were assigned a specific area, if the base was under
attack that you were supposed to take your weapon and go to and defend that area, and
there were times when we were under attack that we went to that area to defend it.

RV: Right. What kind of weapons did you have with you?

RS: We had M-16s at that point?

RV: Did you carry them with you to work or did you keep them in your quarters?

RS: Pretty much kept them in the quarters where we were, and did carry them
sometimes when we were traveling because we didn't know what we were going to get
into or where we were going or. So I did get in the habit of keeping an ammo box full of
clips fully loaded under my bunk and the rifle was, you know the M-16 was on the wall
over my head so I could grab it real quick.
RV: Did you have enough supplies and, not just for your radar equipment but also
you said the ammunition and things like that? Did you ever have a problem
requisitioning things like that?

RS: No, we seemed to do okay. Sometimes we had to wait a little bit for
something but we were never really caught short. You know the radar equipment
sometimes we were short of that. You know sometimes it seems like we were running
out of the C-rations or whatever but we were always able to get them in, you know kind
of a thing. We were well supplied I would say by and large.

RV: Okay. Tell me about coming under attack. I assume that this was your
exposure to combat. Tell me what that was like, I guess Quon Loi and then at Camp
Evans.

RS: Yes, we would come under attack every so often. At one time I had a little
logbook, I guess I was logging in the attacks and things and that got destroyed sometime
after I got home. Probably, oh about fifteen times or so I think we came under attacks in
all three bases.

RV: Okay, tell me.

RS: And they were basically, most of the time it was rocket attacks. Quite often
not more than like three rounds would come in which would mean somebody was just
setting up out on the perimeter someplace, by the time they set them off they were
probably long gone from the area. I know one night at Camp Evans, you know we were
kind of sitting out, and there was a firefight around the perimeter and there were several
helicopters out and gunships and they were shooting rockets in and you could see the
tracers going in and they were like sitting on top of the bunker watching the war like
you’d watch a movie, and everybody’s out there you know in their skivvies and just
sitting around, laughing and joking about it. All of a sudden the three aircraft that were
out there on the perimeter came in at the same time to refuel and they came in and
shut their lights off and sat down and almost immediately we began to get shelled and
here we are all, we’re sitting out there and we’re scrambling to get under cover you know
because we’re alongside the airstrip and what are they doing, they’re lobbing the stuff
down the airstrip, so you know stuff like that. Probably the worst, I think the worst night
was, we were at Phuoc Binh and they had changed. I’m trying to remember whether the
101st was there and they moved out and the 1st Air Cav came in, and so it was kind of like their initiation night. You know the major military units supporting the base had left and the next one had come in and we got shelled.

RV: So you think the enemy knew this, that these two big units had shifted.
RS: Had shifted, yes. And we got shelled probably continuously for over an hour, and when I say continuously I mean like shells going off every ten seconds and just screaming overhead and you know bright flashes of light and noise, it was just horrendous. We were literally shaking in our boots, I mean it was horrendous. And that particular night we never received any instructions to go to our defensive positions, so basically we hunkered down in a long trench that had like steel culvert over the top of it and then sandbags on the top of that and sandbags around the end. So you could see the flash of light and everything, and we just, you know I think that was probably the worst night because like I said, for over an hour it was non-stop just explosions and you know ground shaking and everything. That was a scary time.

RV: How did you deal with that personally?
RS: Shook like a leaf, prayed a lot.

RV: Well, that’s what I wanted to ask you about that. You’re now a minister.
RS: I’m now a minister, yes.

RV: Now, before you went to Vietnam were your spiritual beliefs different?
RS: Not a whole lot. I was always very active in the church from an early age. The only thing is probably the year I was over there, I don’t know that I ever got to what you might call a church service in that whole year, but that, you know, I still prayed, I still read my Bible. We didn’t have a chaplain assigned near us. I didn’t know where the nearest one was and so I.

RV: Did your religious beliefs change or where they deepened while you were there in Vietnam?
RS: I would say they probably stayed about the same. There was a deepening going on and I think it took effect later on after I got home.

RV: Okay, so when you were getting shelled, there’s this saying that there’s no atheists in the foxhole.
RS: I firmly believe that.
RV: Yes, did you find that to be true?
RS: Yes, there was a lot of weeping and wailing and you know, guys just freaking out.
RV: What do you mean, give me an example.
RS: You know screaming, just the noise and the, and a pretty good level of fear I would say. Gets the old adrenaline pumping, that’s for sure. But most of the time the shelling was on a much smaller scale. There would be a few rounds lobbed in and then it would stop and maybe hours later and maybe not for days later there would be a few more rounds and then it would stop.
RV: Was this mainly at night?
RS: Probably seventy-five percent of the time at night.
RV: Now when this would happen, or actually during these firefights and I thought of this when you were describing these helicopters out there at night. You guys were watching them. Did you have any of your men in the tower at this point, was it?
RS: Oh, yes.
RV: It was manned twenty-four hours?
RS: The tower was manned twenty-four hours, yes.
RV: So they were able to direct the copters in, tell them.
RS: Right.
RV: Okay, okay. Were you ever outside at work or near the tower when the shelling began or were you mainly back at your quarters?
RS: Both. There were times when we were out working on equipment. I know one night we’d had a fairly decent stretch of no activity, no enemy activity in our immediate area. The radar set went down, we had an alignment problem and probably had a card go out, burned up or something, and so I got the other radar person up and the two of us went out to the runway and began to work on the set and we had taken a portable light with us and here we’re out there in the middle of, you know, near the runway and nothing around us and we’ve got this bright light overhead so we can see what we’re doing and working on the equipment. We had to pull the drawer out and you know, do the test and do some aligning and what not, and all of a sudden the perimeter
opened up with gunfire. Now, whether it was a sniper had seen the light or whatever way
out and decided to zero in on it or what but I mean that scared us.

RV: You turned the light off, right?
RS: We turned the light off real fast.
RV: At which location was this?
RS: That was at Phuoc Binh.
RV: Were you ever wounded?
RS: No.
RV: Any of your men in your unit ever wounded?
RS: Not while I was there. When I left Quon Loi I had left some of my stuff
behind and I got back to get it a couple weeks later and they said the hut we had stayed in
had been shelled in the corner and some of the guys I think had gotten some shrapnel
wounds. But I was always in the right place at the right time. I visited some friends that
were in the ASD at Qui Nhon and their barracks were located right in the city of Qui
Nhon, and it was one of the guys I knew had guard duty the night I was there and so I
went with him to the guard post and we were in the guard tower and we stood there
talking to each other and a sniper fired at us and the shot hit the barracks right behind us,
you know it kind of whizzed between the two of us kind of a thing. You know those
things bring you back to reality that hey you’re in a war zone and you better keep your
head down and it was kind of a harrowing experience.

RV: What kind of experiences did you have with death; did you ever see any of
the dead bodies or talk to any of the men who went out in the field?
RS: Yes. That was hard. I’m thinking that, I guess my experience with death goes
all the way back to, as a fairly young child my grandparents died and so I remember
going to funerals and viewing the bodies at a fairly young age, and the way it was, the
way I was introduced to it was not frightening and scary. And I think that was helpful.
There was one time I had to go pick up radar parts and I guess I was up in along the coast
in the northern part of the country, north of Da Nang and the only way I could get back
was to, the only air connection I could get from the base I was at was to go to Dong Ha,
which was very close to the demilitarized zone. And I guess I got in there at the end of
some major offensive and the only flights going out were some 123s that were KIA ships,
what they called KIA ships. They were carrying body bags back and they were filled and
the guy said, “You know the only flights we got going out for the next twenty-four hours
is KIA” and the tower guys is saying, “Well, look one of our guys has got to get back,
we’ve got to get the equipment going, would you take them?” And they said, “Well, its
unusual to do that, but under the circumstances yes but your guy has got to know, he’s
going to be on a KIA ship and he’s going to be back there with the bodies.” And you
know I sucked it in and took the ride and that was kind of, it kind of hits you hard that
these guys. You don’t know who they are but these are your guys that died you know in
firefights and what not and that was, that was reality. It hits you right between the eyes.

RV: Talk to me about the enemy, what did you think of the Vietcong and the
North Vietnamese, in general?
RS: There was a, there was a certain level of respect. It almost seems as though
there was more respect for the enemy than there was the local people.

RV: Really?
RS: Yes.
RV: Is this you personally or in general amongst the men?
RS: A feeling that I had I guess. It comes from me, but you know it was my
contact with the. Our troops tended to look down on the ARVN soldiers.

RV: Tell me about that, why?
RS: You know like their heart really wasn’t in the fighting. That was the word
on the street so to speak. That you couldn’t count on them when you needed to and the
only ones you counted on were your own military personnel, or in the case of, if there
were Korean soldiers in an area, they had a high reputation of being really tough, really
harsh, really fight to the bitter end, but the ARVNs had this reputation of running from a
fight. You know not being there when you needed them. It was just, and I was picking
that up from being with other groups, and once in a while we were in an area where there
was an ARVN camps and things like that, traveled through those areas and the troops
seemed to have more of a respect for the enemy.

RV: Were you ever personally exposed to the ARVN or any of the other
indigenous forces?
RS: A little bit, limited basis, not you know, I mean they were, there were times when we were in the same areas, you know you saw them, but I really didn’t have what you’d call personal dealings with them. I mean they were in and out and I saw them and I saw them on duty and whatever but I may have gestured to them or said a brief word but not really what you’d call, what I would call a personal contact.

RV: How about with the other allied forces, you mentioned the Koreans?
RS: Yes, I didn’t have any real close contact with any of the other allied forces?
RV: What do you think were the strengths and weaknesses of the enemy?
RS: They knew the territory. We were in a foreign land, they were not. I mean even if they had come down from the North they still knew the area. They knew the conditions. These were foreign conditions to us, or to me, growing up in New York.
RV: Right, big difference.
RS: Yes, just the climate, the atmosphere, the geography, everything, the language, you know knowing the language and all of that.

RV: What about weaknesses?
RS: Weaknesses of?
RV: Of the enemy, of the North Vietnamese or Vietcong?
RS: I think the, and this would be my personal viewpoint on that I guess was their equipment, how they had to get equipment to places. I mean you know we loaded it up on planes and it arrived, and they carried it manually down trails sometimes, you know great distances. Some of their equipment obviously was good. Their AK-47 was respected by everybody, but we definitely had most of the time superior firepower. I mean when you look at the gunships and the rockets and you look at the mini-gun setups that eventually came along and the thousand rounds a minute that you could shoot out, I mean you could take on a force that was much larger than what you were and hold them back, if not prevail. You know the heavy artillery that we used, you know the 105s, the 155s, the .50 caliber machine guns, the quads they had mounted on trucks and stuff like that, just amazing firepower. I remember waking up one night on the floor in Phuoc Binh and it was because B-52s were dropping their loads not too many miles away, and just the rumble shook everything, I remember the rafters were shaking, the dust was falling off of the rafters and the ground was shaking.
RV: Did it shake you off your bed?
RS: It literally shook me out of the bunk and onto the floor. It was like unreal, just amazing.
RV: Could you hear it?
RS: Oh, yes, oh, yes. Yes, we figured they were only a couple of miles away. It was just, I was glad they were on our side. It was one of those times you were glad you were not on the receiving end, but those things kind of stuck with me and all that. Then later you might fly over an area and you’d see literally hundreds of bomb craters, you know usually filled with water by that time and you could see the devastation.
RV: When you remember combat, thinking about it today, do you remember those bodies on that 123 flight, do you remember the shelling that night for the B-52, what do you remember most about combat?
RS: That’s what, I tend to remember all of that you know, once I get thinking about it again. It’s the sounds, the flashing lights, the vibrations, the explosions. I think for a long time once I came home any gunfire of any kind was difficult to take. My wife tells about the time that a car backfired and I was literally down on the gutter of the street.
RV: Really?
RS: There were times, oh gosh. I’m trying to think when it was. We bought a place out in the country in about 1987, and we had lots of, you know we had five and a half acres up on the hillside, and so I was out doing some work and enjoying myself and I guess it was near the beginning of hunting season. And some guys across the valley, miles away across the valley on the other hill side must have been zeroing in their rifles for hunting season, and so all of a sudden there was just a ton of shooting and the hair on the back of my neck just went up, I could just, it for a moment sounded like a fire fight, and I was trying to figure out where to go and what to do and this was in 1987, 1988.
RV: Almost twenty years after the fact.
RS: Yes, yes. To this day I don’t have anything to do with weapons.
RV: Is that because of your war experience?
RS: Yes, I used to, as a youngster I used to go traipsing through the woods and go hunting. I never really got anything, I mean it was just you know, you’d go out and
you’d have a rifle and you’d shoot a few cans or do whatever. I never really killed any
animals. It was more the fun of being out there. When I came home I got rid of all the
weapons, didn’t want them, didn’t want them around. Stayed out of the woods you know
hunting season? Didn’t want to hear those sounds of bullets going over my head any
more. It just, not that it happened a lot you know, I mean there was only a few specific
times that those bullets whizzed over my head, but that was enough. I didn’t want to deal
with that any more and so I never bought guns for our children. I never bought toy guns
for our children or grandchildren. I don’t take youth groups to paint ball things. I know
some groups have gone and done the paint ball thing and laser tag where they shoot at
each other and those things. I refuse to do it. I just, I can watch war movies, war movies
don’t bother me. I don’t like weapons in real life, that’s a tough one.

RV: Let’s talk about your personal life there on base, how much contact did you
have with your wife and your family?

RS: Letters and tapes, that was it.

RV: How often?

RS: Tried to write almost daily and I know she was doing the same thing. The
rest of my family, oh probably once every couple of weeks, but my wife was almost daily
and I was writing to her almost daily. We didn’t receive them daily, you know you
received six or seven letters and then you’d go for a stretch without getting anything, and
part of that was the mail delivery system. We went for stretches. I know at, I remember
at Camp Evans being socked in. There were hills around us and it seems like we went
ten days straight where no flights got in and out because of the fog and the mist, and we
just were really socked in. You could stand in the middle of the runway and not see the
end of the runway. And that cut down on the mail delivery and the overland route was
under sniper attack and things and so stuff got through on a limited basis, but we did send
reel to reel, those little reel-to-reel tapes back and forth and letters. There were very
limited facilities for phone calls, there was like the MARS radio connection or whatever,
I never did that, you know I never connected with that.

RV: Why not?

RS: There wasn’t one readily accessible where I was kind of a thing, and it was
just like I’m here and I’m not sure I could, you know I’m not sure being on the phone
talking, you know if I was able to get someplace to do that I would have been able to
handle that.

RV: What do you mean?

RS: My wife wanted me to take an R & R and meet in Hawaii, and I couldn’t do
that. I was like I’m here; I’m dealing with it. If I leave I’m not coming back kind of a
thing. It’s like once I’m out of here, I’m out of here and I just didn’t think I could handle
being gone for a few days, coming back to the world as we called it, being with a loved
one and then leaving them again to go back and be in Vietnam. So I never did take an
out of country R & R.

RV: Even though something could have happened to you and that might be the
last chance you could have seen somebody?

RS: Yes, yes. But I was pretty much determined I was coming home. That was, I
don’t know. I know guys talked about that you know there was this fear from some that
I’m not going to make it and I had a different attitude, I definitely felt I was coming
home.

RV: But do you think you could control your destiny or was that?

RS: I don’t know, it was just a feeling, you know. It was just a, you know I could
have been dead wrong, but I’m home.

RV: Right, right, proved to be true.

RS: I know some of the guys used to be afraid of everything. We had guys in the
unit that the first night in they woke up to the explosions of our own artillery and ran
screaming to the bunkers and it’s like I didn’t do that, and I said, “That’s outgoing, that’s
our stuff.”

RV: How did you know that?

RS: I don’t know, it was, the sound is different, and they used to joke about it that
when we were at Quon Loi the guys would wake up in the morning and I’d be getting up
and they’d say, “Boy, you really slept sound last night, we went to the bunker two times,
or we went to the bunker three times last night and you know you were sleeping through
it.” And so the joke used to be if I wasn’t down in the bunker it was safe to go back to
your bunk and if it was really incoming I was the first one down there.
RV: That’s interesting; you would wake yourself up according to the sound without you really be conscious of the sound.

RS: Without really being conscious of it.

RV: That’s very interesting.

RS: I would, you know you’d be semi-awake but just my mind was like; okay that stuff is going’s out. You’d hear it but you wouldn’t act on it, you’d continue sleeping and might not even be aware of other people moving around but stuff that was coming in, boom I was. I could be down there in a flash. It was just one of those things, little quirk, I don't know.

RV: That’s interesting. Were you able to keep up with news back in the United States any?

RS: Not really, once in a while you know a clipping sent or you know something that would be said in a letter or whatever, but I wasn’t receiving newspapers or things like that to really know and I really kind of felt during my three years in the army I was probably more isolated from what was going on in the world then I was before or after.

RV: Yes, you’ve described that before, actually being stateside and being that way.

RS: Yes, yes because of being on base and being under the training and everything, there just wasn't the time allotted to keep up with everything and just.

RV: So you never took any R & Rs?

RS: No, not officially. I took a day or two when I had to go to Vung Tao and sat on the beach with a buddy for a couple hours and stayed at a hotel one night in Saigon and spent an afternoon at Red Ball Beach kind of thing up near Da Nang but again, most of those were done while I was on my way to pick up equipment. You know if we were picking up parts that we’re not under the gun to have installed right away, I mean if it was just extra supplies that we needed and wanted to have on hand and you knew you could take a couple of days and travel there and back so you’d have an afternoon free that you didn’t have to be worried about thing and you’d just kind of go down to the beach or whatever or go to one of the PXs and one of the other places.

RV: Tell me what your impressions of Saigon were.
RS: It was quite a place. There were, what really surprised me was the mix of
architecture. You know the old, old buildings and then some of the new stuff that had
been built and then of course some of the stuff that had been blown apart and shelled in
any of the places we were at. But there was this contrast, teeming with people. I always,
always had to laugh, you’d come to a stoplight in one of these major cities and you’d
look across the way and the whole street would fill up. I mean if it was a two lane street
with one lane going each direction or if was a four lane with two lanes each direction,
you’d look across the way and it would be four lanes wide coming at you and where you
were would be four lanes wide going that way and when the light changed, you know it
was a race to see who could get into their two lanes. Just, it was amazing, but it was
bicycles, motorbikes, lambrettas; all the motorized vehicles that the Vietnamese had, and
then you know on our side we had the jeeps and the deuce and a halves and all those trucks
and stuff. I was always glad to be sitting up high in one of those deuce and halves. You
know when you came to one of those intersections where it just looked like a madcap
situation. When that light changed you knew everybody was going to try to narrow it
down into two lanes.

RV: What were your impression of the Vietnamese civilians?

RS: I was amazed that in the midst of war life goes on. Whether you were in the
cities, and of course the cities had their times when things were very quiet, you know the
Tet Offensive was probably the worst, and you know we were really at the tail end of
that, that was kind of over by the time I got there because that was in February and I got
there in July but there was, you could see the remains of it and the remnants of it. You
know some of the operations still going on were related to the Tet Offensive at that point,
but you know people continued to go about doing daily things and even in areas like
Quon Loi and Phuoc Binh where there were little villages, in Camp Evans there was a
village outside the camp area you know that people went about their daily duties in spite
of the fact there was shelling going on and you know. That always kind of struck me;
people just didn’t cease to exist. They didn’t cease to function they continued to try to
eke out some kind of a living.

RV: How much personal contact did you have with the Vietnamese civilians?
RS: We had, in Phuoc Binh we had some locals that came in to do laundry for us and to take care of things so they were basically there during the course of the day. Let’s say from 8:30 in the morning until five in the afternoon and there was that contact. Once in a while you’d go downtown, you’d get something to eat or something to drink or whatever and there was contact with local people. You’d walk off base and you’d be, certain, like in Phuoc Binh, I took a lot of pictures of the local streets and the activities and kids would always be clamoring all over you, and you had to be careful because sometimes they’d be trying to rip you off. You know you had rings on, watches on, they’d be trying to slide them on, my wedding band was on, you know, solid, there was no way that was coming off unless you cut the finger. Usually I took my good watch off when I went downtown and I had an old watchband with a crystal and no watch and so I used to slip that one when I’d go downtown just to get a reaction out of the kids because you’d be walking down and your hand would be by your side and these little kids would come up and “Hey GI!” and they’d hang on to you kind of thing and you could feel them tugging at your ring, and you know they’re not going to get it off, and they’d be checking any jewelry you had. Well of course I had this dead watch kind of thing and they’d be looking at that and they’d stop in their tracks and it’s like, “Man, you’re a crazy GI, you know?” RV: When you think about the Vietnamese civilians today do you see those kids or do you see the older generation or do you see the housemaids who were doing your laundry?

RS: I see more of the adults. Well, and today there are enough people who have come to this country, enough Vietnamese that there are Vietnamese communities and when I was serving in the Binghamton, New York area, there was a fairly large Vietnamese community so you see adults again and you remember the adults that you saw over there. RV: Did you find them trustworthy, especially the ones who were on base with you?

RS: Pretty much, there were some questions at times about, you know, around the bases in general there were a lot of Vietnamese hired to do the mess hall duties and things like that, the laundry around the base and things like that. We had gotten to know some
of them and trusted them; I mean they didn’t seem like the people that would be one
ting by day and another thing by night, although I know that happened. We did, I know
one time they caught a fellow that they claimed was pacing off the distance from the
three-legged tower that we had in Camp Evans to various locations. He was dealt with
by the MPs and taken away.

RV: What was your impression of Vietnam, the country itself?
RS: It was different from anything I had ever experienced before. There was a
certain beauty to parts to it. You know some of the mountains and some of the, you
know the shrubbery, the jungle areas that just had a, you know there was a beauty of
nature. The thing that amazed me about that, I never saw any clear water. I mean there
were no clear streams; there were no clear rivers. Anything I ever saw always looked
muddy.

RV: Even at Vung Tao?
RS: Well, that was on the ocean.

RV: Right, so the ocean was clear at least.

RS: Right, but the rivers and the lakes and the streams, which were here in New
York state I mean gee you can go to any number of streams and there be rocky, gravelly
bottoms, and its clear and you can see all the way through it even if the waters you know
five feet deep. You can see down into the bottom kind of a thing. Rivers that you would
picture fishing in or anything, and I never saw a place that I wanted to go fishing or
swimming in or anything when I was over there. The water was always just seemed to be
brown and dirty looking, just.

RV: What would you and your men do for entertainment?
RS: A lot of listening to tapes, records. A lot of guys spent money on the heavy-
duty tapes and speakers and you know the tape players and things. There were, you
know they got good prices on them in the PXs and what not. So they had those hooked
up in the huts. I didn’t, I didn’t own any heavy-duty equipment. Sent most of my money
home, but you know the guys had a tape so we would listen to music.

RV: What songs take you back to that time?
RS: Music of the Doors was a biggie during that time. I’m trying to remember,
"If You’re Going to San Francisco," that was always a tearjerker because most guys when
they left in country went to San Francisco or near San Francisco as a place to get out the
service and then head home. We usually put together a little club someplace, you know
in one of the huts there would be a corner where they’d put a bar in, and guys did a lot of
drinking. I never acquired a taste for drinking, so I sat and drink Coke or 7Up. Drugs
were a toughie, it seemed like marijuana was easy to get. Hashish they seemed to have,
and again I just could never get into that. I never smoked, never even smoked cigarettes
let alone getting into anything else. I couldn’t, that wasn’t me.

RV: Was it prevalent in your unit or just in the barracks there?
RS: Fairly, yes. There was probably a core group that used the marijuana or the
hashish quite regularly. You could smell it as you walked through the unit. Sometimes it
affected their ability to do the job.

RV: Really?
RS: Yes, I woke up my buddy one night and he was supposed to help me, you
know the radar set was down and we had to go out, and I tried to get him awake and he
was out of it. There was no way he was going to be of any value to me out on the unit
and I left him there and went and did the job alone.

RV: What did you say to him the next day?
RS: Oh, I kind of gave him a you know; I kind of chewed him out. I don’t know if
I had any effect on him, and he was not a normal user. I mean he wasn’t one of the guys
you could count on him doing it every week but he just, once in a while he’d, and he’d be
useless.

RV: What kind of contact with women did your unit have?
RS: Contact with women?
RV: Yes.
RS: [Laughing] Extremely limited. At Camp Evans there was a MASH unit on the
hill near our control tower, and so there were female nurses there. You know I saw them
from a distance. I didn’t have any personal contact with any. I’m trying to think; once or
twice we went places where there were donut dollies. My contact with women during
that year was almost negligible.

RV: Okay. Did you attend any USO shows?
RS: No, the closest thing I got. There was a Korean touring group that came into one of the areas, and so we got to see a Korean band and performers you know do American songs kind of a thing. And there was quite a turnout for that as I remember but I’m not sure about the major USO shows, you know like when Bob Hope came over and those kinds of things. We were in a smaller area and very few guys could go in to those shows when they had them. They were for the guys in that particular area mainly. They would bring guys from the outside in but it was on a limited basis, and so we just, it wasn’t an opportunity I guess.

RV: Did your unit have any pets?

RS: In Phuoc Binh some of the guys had dogs. A couple of places I were at guys had, guys that were in the Aviation Detachments, there was one I was at where they had a couple of pet monkeys, dogs were the big thing I guess.

RV: How about your exposure to wild animals, anything unusual happen?

RS: No, no we ran across a few snakes here and there and in the, curled up in the showers kind of a thing.

RV: Oh really?

RS: Yes [laughing].

RV: Tell me about that.

RS: But I don’t even know what kind it was now but I mean one of the guys brining this dead snake in on a stick and said, “Man, look what I found up in the shower.” It was like holy cow and that happened a couple, maybe two or three times in the whole time I was over there.

RV: How about in your quarters itself?

RS: No, thank god.

RV: Any problem with rats?

RS: There was some evidence around but we had, stuff was put out you know to kind of eliminate that and we kept things pretty much sealed up, you know metal containers so.

RV: Right. Let me ask a couple questions about your relationship and what you witnessed, the relationship amongst the men in your unit. Did you ever see any race issues, anything like that?
RS: There were on a limited basis. Not what you see in the movies sometimes you know when they’re doing the Vietnam thing but my experience, my own personal experience was it was not an issue for me I guess. I got along with whoever I was with, black, white, or whatever. They played their music; I listened to their music. The guys from Arkansas played their country stuff, I listened to their country stuff and I didn’t complain about it. Its like hey we’re in this together, you get along. You put up with my stuff; I put up with your stuff kind of a thing. And in our unit, our ASDs were mixed units and once in a while somebody would get upset with somebody and you know throw the race card kind of a thing but by and large we got along, and it was not an issue but it was in some of the field units. We were not a forward field unit. We were a base camp unit.

RV: Did you ever feel any resentment because of that, because you were based to the rear, I guess resentment from any of the forward ground troops, anybody that you came in contact with?

RS: No, I didn’t feel that. We were, we were kind of like, we were the in between guys. There were the guys that were the forward units and then we were the guys that were in these small landing zones, you know the small places, and we were like in between and then there were the guys on the big bases and the guys on the big bases quite frankly had it soft. I mean they did have air conditioned barracks, they did have dining areas and wonderful PX access and some of them never picked up a weapon the whole time they were in country and probably never had it in their possession. It was locked in an armory someplace. They had their hot and cold running water and their flush toilets and whatever. We, you know we burned our shit. I still have pictures of me doing that.

RV: Do you really?

RS: Oh, yes someplace I got some slides or some pictures of me out there on shit burning detail. You know, life as a highly trained radar technician.

RV: What about the relationship that you formed with the men in your unit, any special friendships developed out of your time in Vietnam?

RS: There were a few of us who were in basic together, who wound up in radar school together, who came back and were in the ASDs together. So there was, you know there was some close contact then. A few of those guys, you know I got together with
them when we came back to the States but I’ve lost touch with them since about the first year and a half, two years that I’ve been back, and did not run into anybody that I’ve served with since then. And for a lot of years I, for a lot of years I was what I call a closet vet, I didn’t talk about it with anybody.

RV: Why not?

RS: Because of the stigma when you came home you were, you know the anti-war movement was really strong, and there was no respect for the vets, that was hard. You come home and in the traveling back home, you know I had a uniform on and everything and people just looked down their nose at you and spit at you and made snide comments.

RV: This happened to you personally?

RS: Yes, as I came through the airports and the bus terminals and things and it was just.

RV: You were in uniform?

RS: Yes, yes because you have travel orders. Yes, and then there was no respect, and after you got out it was like, if you were in a group of people and people were talking, you know professional people and you ‘re talking about what you’re doing and what not and if mention of the war came up, it was like you were really looked down on for having gone over. It was like you would have been better received if you had been a, if you’d gone to Canada, that was the feeling I got from people.

RV: So you just stayed in the closet with it.

RS: Oh yes, you just, you know sometimes you’d be out in a group and if you found out somebody was a vet, you know something was mentioned or some little thing was said, you’d pick up on it and you’d go off in a corner and talk together, and that would be the extent of it. You wouldn’t do it publicly and it wasn’t until about 1987 that I say I had my time of coming out of the closet, and I had been on a disability leave from the church and was in the Binghamton, New York area and there was a group there called the Organization of Vietnam Veterans. And they had been going for several years and they’d had some deaths and they were really seeking a chaplain and they really wanted somebody who was ordained clergy. And one of the ministers serving in that area was approached and he said, “Oh, I know a Nam vet who is an ordained clergy” and so they
invited me to be part of the group and that was the first time I became affiliated with a
group, and that was the first time I came out of the closet. I mean I began to talk openly
then with people about it. I began to wear organization patches and a hat and things that
identified me as a Nam vet, and prior to that time I didn’t.

RV: And today you can talk about it openly?
RS: Today I talk about it openly, yes.
RV: So not a lot of people asked you about your experience once you got home
and got out of the service.
RS: Right it was, we didn’t talk about it in family. You know, parents didn’t ask
me a whole lot about it. They were just glad to have me back, one piece. Didn’t talk to
my brothers much about it. My wife and I talked a little bit about some things. She
would find evidence of things and say, “What about this, you never told me about this?’
Well, yes you know that was a difficult time and it was just like, it was not acceptable to
talk about it. So you just buried the stuff and then went on.

RV: Before we move into your post-Vietnam life, let me ask you a couple other
questions about your service in country. What was the bravest action that you witnessed
while you were in Vietnam?
RS: The bravest action that I witnessed?
RV: Or heard about, whatever comes to mind?
RS: Boy, you got me on that one.
RV: Well, think about it and you can come back to it.
RS: Okay.
RV: How about the most humorous event? What stands out that you look back
and laugh about?
RS: Oh, a number of things. We always laugh about the incoming when we were
sitting on the top of the bunker watching the war, I mean that always, it’s just stupid thing
but there you are sitting there watching the war and then all of a sudden you’re in it. The
other thing was, one of the other things was near the end of our tour the 4th of July was
coming up, and so we had this brilliant idea that we’d collect some of these flares and
have a 4th of July celebration. And so we spent some evenings prior to the 4th of July
going around to some of the perimeter guard posts and we’d tell the guys that were on
duty that we were from two doors down and we got there and they didn’t have enough
flares, could they spare a couple, and they’d give you a couple and the next night there
would be a different group on duty so we went and asked for some more flares. And then
we, the 4\textsuperscript{th} of July when it started to get dark; well the guys couldn’t wait man. They
were just eager to send off all these flares and we started sending them off and before you
know it people all over the perimeter were sending them off.

    RV: Really?
RS: Yes, it was like we started this big thing, and next thing you know this second
lieutenant comes steaming into our area and he is really upset because we’re going to
give away our location to the enemy. And its like the enemy knows where we are.
They’ve been pacing off the tower; they know where we are. They zero in on this three-
legged tower that we have standing on this hillside. It’s very obvious to them where we
are, so we weren’t really concerned about that. But I was the ranking NCO down in that
area and I got my butt chewed from one end to the other, and then he wanted to know
who was in charge and so I told him where the other guy was, where the master sergeant
was, and he went up to him and that guy came down and just chewed me out again and
wanted to know where the flare gun was. Well, these were those pop flares, you know
you smack them on something hard and off they go. We were not using a flare gun, but
he was determined to confiscate our flare gun and so I went into the unit and gave him
this dusty, rusty old flare gun that we had hanging there that had never been used, and
you know off he went and we chilled out for the night. But that was one of those weird
things. The other thing is every once in a while somebody would blow up one of those
gas burners.

    RV: For the shower.
RS: Yes, yes and I remember two of the guys up there one late afternoon and as
the story goes, as they tell it when they came back, the one guy broke his leg, got blown
off right off the roof and the two of them are up there and they’re dripping the gas in and
the other’s guy’s saying “You’re getting too much gas in, you’re getting too much gas in”
and the other guy is going, “No, no, no,” he says, “Don’t worry, I won’t blow us away, I
won’t blow us away” baboom and it blew them both off the roof. And you know they, the
guy that came in finally with his leg in a cast was laughing about it too. It was just a
stupid thing but I always remember that as one of those funny things.

RS: I haven’t talked this much about my experience in a long time.

RV: Well, let me ask you, when you were getting ready to leave Vietnam or
getting short, did you know the exact date you were leaving?

RS: Yes. Usually you got your orders when you were, when you had like thirty
days left, and I remember, and I had one of those short time calendars that you colored in,
I still have that someplace.

RV: Did you behave any differently you know as you were getting shorter did you
try to take less risks or did you go about your days normally?

RS: You know there was always that nagging thing in the back of your mind that
you’d better take it easy, and not do this and not do that. And I think I was probably
more uptight once I left Camp Evans to come back down into the Saigon area for the out-
processing because it was several days of out-processing, and you were in different
surroundings, you were with different people. It was anxiety producing, that least week,
and then we were in transient barracks and a few of us knew each other because we were
part of the same units and we were out-processing at the same time. And so we kind of
took turns sleeping and a couple guys staying awake, and also they were calling you for
the aircraft. You never knew which one you were going to get called for, so there was
like this tension and this edginess and you know about making the connection. I
remember one of the guys took a picture of me when I got my orders, and I’m sitting
there on the sandbags in a T-shirt with a big smile on my face holding up my orders. You
know the word was \textit{figmo}.

RV: It was what?

RS: The word was \textit{figmo}.

RV: Meaning?

RS: “Fuck it, I got my orders!” You know I’m out of here. And you know I got
those with less than thirty days but at that point you had orders to go home.

RV: Okay. Did your wife know when you were coming home?

RS: Yes, basically I was in touch with her to say I didn’t know exactly the day
because part of my thing was we didn’t know the flight schedules. You know they were
getting so many planes in and they’d take so many and then that would be it and then
you’d have to wait. Well, the number of planes they could get was one factor; the weather
was another factor of getting them in and out. There were all kinds of things. So you
could be delayed an extra day or two, you wouldn’t know. And then the flip side of that
was, because I had less than three months left of military service, they were discharging
me. So the word was we were going to Travis in California outside of San Francisco and
would be processed out. Now we were getting word from people in Saigon saying that
they’re getting them out in thirty-six hours or they’re getting them out in twenty-four
hours or thirty hours. We were hearing different things as to how long it was taking guys
to get discharged and so again we didn’t know how long it was going to take. When I got
there I called home and said, “Hey, you know I’m in California, they’re processing me
out, I still don’t know when.” And then when I got to San Francisco airport and had a
definite flight then again I said, “It looks like I’m going to be in at such and such a time
into New York” but you know we played it by ear, a step along the way.

RV: How did you feel on that fight out of Vietnam?
RS: Oh, man. When it lifted off the runway everybody cheered.
RV: Really?
RS: Everybody cheered, to a man they cheered. When they announced we had
left Vietnam airspace there was a cheer. When we touched the ground in Alaska you
know guys got off the plane and kissed the ground. It was a big relief, it was a big relief.
Although I will say that probably for a period of ten years after I came home, there were
times when I, if I was feeling a lot of pressure, either through my work or whatever, that I
would have nightmares and it was always they same nightmare. I was always stuck in
Vietnam, and they always lost my orders and that was a reoccurring dream and I would
wake up in a cold sweat. I mean the sheets would be soaked. I would be ringing wet and
it was always that same dream. That they had lost my orders and when the lost the
orders, the dream was always, well it was going to take them at least six months to a year
to re-cut new orders, and anybody that was there now was going to stay an extra amount
of time and that was a tough one. And it was probably ten years before I got to the point
where I can talk about it; I no longer have that dream.

RV: This sounds like symptoms of PTSD.
RS: Yes.

RV: Were you ever diagnosed?

RS: No, I, in 1987 I had a real rough year. Some things happened in a church that I was serving and I just shut down. I was put on a disability leave. I was under the care of several doctors and received medication for anxiety and I had panic attacks and all kinds of things, and partway through that process and I guess it might have been about the time I was getting in touch with the Organization of Vietnam Veterans that they said, “You ought to go to the VA.” And probably by the time I did that I was already coming out of it. The VA doctor didn’t diagnose it as PTSD but he said, “Boy” he said, “You score real high in some of the categories” but he said “In other categories you don’t.” And I’m saying, “That’s probably because I’ve been under medication now for a year” by the time I saw him and had seen a psychologist and a counselor so I was seeing two professionals plus I was on medications and it was another, it was a couple of years. I was not doing anything. I was receiving a disability from the church.

RV: Did you relate, when you first started having these problems, did you think it was related to Vietnam or did that not enter your mind?

RS: I didn’t think, I didn’t think so at the time, because of the incidents that happened where I was. I was moved into a, at the time I was a United Methodist minister, and the bishop makes the appointment. They move you when they want to move you. I don’t know if you’re familiar with the system at all.

RV: A little bit, yes sir.

RS: And I was doing real well in the situation I was in. The church was growing; we were having a great time. My kids were doing very well in school and my daughter was a junior. I was nearing the end of my work on a Doctor of Ministry, and the bishop said, “You’re moving.” And I said, “No,” and was told in no uncertain terms that that was not an acceptable answer. I was moving and the church was totally upset. Our family was upset. I was upset; went into a situation where they also had lost a beloved pastor the same way, and was just never accepted. It was tough. People just refused to acknowledge my presence with them. You know you’d preach on Sunday morning and people would go out the door and turn their heads the other way and wouldn’t even shake your hand kind of a thing. They were so upset at the system and I was representative of
the system. And then our home was broken into and things were stolen and destroyed and
all kinds of things. And I just, I shut down and you know as I was starting the healing
process, I wasn't in touch like I said with the VA until probably after a year into this, and
by then I was, and I had applied for a disability through the VA too at that point. But like
I said, I was starting to get better and I wasn't about too, they denied me on numerous
occasions. I was still being treated by the VA but they were denying my claim, and I
finally got to the point where I was feeling better and I said to heck with you guys.

RV: To heck with you guys the VA, or to heck with you guys the United
Methodist Church?

RS: To heck with the VA; yes, to heck with the VA. I was getting better and
wasn’t going to jump through all their hoops and what not. So I’m back in the saddle.

RV: Do you feel like you suffer any disabilities today from your service in
Vietnam?

RS: No, there are some things that I recognize that I probably don’t deal as well
with as I could but I recognize that. You cope. Nothing’s perfect.

RV: Right, right. What about your transition to civilian life? How difficult was
that for you once you got stateside and was discharged out of the Army?

RS: Well, its like you know one day you’re in country, and you’re in the midst of
everything that’s happening there and then I was home. I mean, I didn’t, I probably didn’t
sleep much the last couple of days because of the out-processing and the atmosphere and
the tension that was all part of that, and then when I got stateside again it was, you know
the out-processing and it did take us forty-right hours to get out. They got bogged down,
and it was like you slept on a bleacher because they were always calling you up and so
there was no, they were doing it round the clock, twenty-four hours, processing people.
And so by the time I got on the plane, I told the stewardess, give me a pillow and don’t
wake me until we get to Chicago. That was the nest stop from San Francisco, and I slept
that whole time. Just zonked right out and then we changed planes in Chicago and went
to New York and again I slept that whole trip and it was like, and all of a sudden, boom;
you’re home and now everything is safe and sound and you go about your life again.
That was kind of hard, that there was no real transition time. You literally jumped from
one situation into another. That was probably not the best thing to do. You know there
was no decompression. As a result there were some things, the loud sounds that
sometimes were very disruptive, but I survived that.

RV: Okay when you got back home how much did you keep up with the war back
in Vietnam?

RS: For the first six months there were still guys over there that I knew, so like at
Christmas time my wife and I put together boxes of stuff and sent them over to the guys
that I still knew. Of course you were bombarded with it on TV at that point, and I did
kind of keep up with it that point because I did know guys that were there, still serving
and I had a concern for them. But probably after the first year, you know at that point we
were doing our own thing, and I was safe and sound and I had done my time. I guess that
was one of the key things, and by that time the war seemed to be winding down at that
point. By the time I had been home for a year they were starting to get into the troop
withdrawals and so I got further and further removed from it. You know didn’t pay that
close attention. I did not do any of the demonstrations or anything.

RV: What did you think of that anti-war movement?

RS: I really struggled with that and I struggle with it today.

RV: With the present war or looking back at Vietnam?

RS: No, with the Vietnam anti-war movement because my feeling was, the strong
feeling I had was the anti-war movement was venting their frustration with the
administration on the guys who were doing the job, on those of us who were serving in
the Army. And we were serving out of a sense of duty and we were told to do and to go
and we did. But they specifically targeted us. They didn’t, I didn’t feel that those who
were running the war were the ones that were really targeted. They vented on the vets,
on the guys that were over there and on the vets that came home, and I have a tough time
forgiving them for that. I’m not for this current Iraqi war. I was not for Desert Storm, but
the last thing I would do is pick on a guy who was serving in the military. I voiced my
opinion to the members of Congress, the Representatives, anybody who has the clout to
do something, and I respect the guys who go, and the women now, the men and the
women who serve, and I would not do anything to disrespect what they do. And by and
large the anti-war movements since that time I think have learned from that because I
remember during the Desert Storm how the troops were treated. There were people who
spoke out against the war at Desert Storm, but they still sent letters and care packages to
troops and when they were received home, they were received home with hero’s
welcomes and that was the other thing I struggled with, we had no welcomes.
RV: Right. How much of a process do you think that was? Was it part of the
Vietnam syndrome, the fact the Desert Storm guys were treated so much differently, the
government made an effort to make sure they had parades and things like that or?
RS: Yes, and I felt they were receiving the benefit of what we had gone through,
because we had been, I felt mistreated and I think the government recognized to a certain
degree that that’s what happened and they wanted to make amends for that. On the other
hand I remember a couple of local parades where they welcomed home Desert Storm
people and I stayed home, I didn’t go.
RV: On purpose?
RS: On purpose, yes. I was struggling with that because they made such a hoop-
la over it. It was like they over did it, and I’d just, rather than be a visible thorn I guess I
just stayed home. I figured it was better not to go and say something or do something that
I would regret later on, and I was just basically silent about it.
RV: What did you think of the media coverage of the Vietnam War?
RS: It, of course it was one of the first ones that you got to see immediately. You
know I mean stuff was broadcast, not immediately in a sense and you could tune in the
evening news and wee the events of what had happened during the way kind of thing. It
was powerful but sometimes overplayed. People forgot about some of the aspects of it.
They focused in on certain things and neglected other things and I hold the media
accountable for those things. The My Lai massacre for one thing. Yes, it was a horrible
thing, and it rightly needed to be brought out in the open, and I didn’t have a problem
with that. I have a problem with, you know they persecuted one person, you know who
took the brunt of that and I think some of that should have been distributed. On the same
level the media I believe ignored some of the other atrocities done by the North
Vietnamese and the Vietcong, and one of those that really sticks out in my mind is the
massacre at Hue and they killed five, six thousand of their own people.
RV: During the Tet Offensive.
RS: During the Tet Offensive, buried them in mass graves, and you know you read about that on page thirty-seven in the New York Times, buried on the back page, or not the back page but you know page thirty-seven in a small column its reported, but it’s never highlighted. It’s never spoken about as an atrocity, and in my mind its every much an atrocity as was My Lai and both needed to be lifted up by the media and that’s just two examples. And I’m sure there were others that were things that needed to be brought out and dealt with and if possible changed.

RV: Sir, let’s pause just for a second, I need to change the disk. Okay, go ahead, sir did you want to talk about the media any more?

RS: No, I think I pretty much covered that. You can get my thirty-minute sermon on that I suppose.

RV: Right, right. Well tell me what you thought of the Vietnamization policy; of turning the war over to the Vietnamese, did you think that was viable?

RS: There again, you know the experience and what I was hearing from guys who were having the contact was that was not going to work because of the reputation that the ARVN's had. That they wouldn’t stay and fight, that they weren’t really committed to it, and it just seemed so many things. The governments changed so frequently and you know we backed one and then we helped dethrone them and then we’d back another and its like the whole process was screwed up.

RV: How do you think they could have done it differently?

RS: And turning the war over to them was just a polite way of saying, “You know, we’re trying to get out of here, you all deal with it” and it was just not the way to go.

RV: Was there something different the United States could have done you think overall strategy wise?

RS: I’m not sure. It was one of those situations that you know what difference did our presence really make there in terms of, you know. I know that the policy at the time was the Cold War, the whole idea. Well if this country goes then the next country will go and the next country will go, and did we really make a difference. Some things are going to change anyway and some things are probably better off if they run the course they’re going. So I’m just not sure we approached that at all in a good manner.
RV: Looking at the United States withdrawal, do you think that, Kissinger and Nixon were saying that the United States withdrew, had achieved peace with honor? Do you think that we did?

RS: Oh, not really, not really because we had, you know we had kind of committed ourselves at one point to really, you know with the troop buildups that we were really going to make a difference there, and then all of a sudden we changed and began to pull out. You know you can’t have it both ways I guess, and it just put people in a precarious position. I mean you know you go into an area and you’re like you have a presence there, but if you’re fired upon you’ve got to get permission to return fire kind of a thing. Well how do you win a battle that way? Or if you’re working with an ARVN group and that group has to, you have to let them take control of the battle and go in and so you’re kind of hanging there and that’s. If you’re going to fight, fight, if you’re not going to fight, don’t be there.

RV: Do you think the United States could have just used more initiative, taken more initiative on its own and done maybe more, taken the war more to the enemy?

RS: I’m not sure about that one. That’s one of those issues that should we have been there in the first place, that’s the key for me. You know would more firepower have done it? I don’t know because what were we protecting? If there was a solid government in place that we were protecting that would have been one thing, but it never seemed to develop into that. If you look back at the history it was, you know, one group after another, after another, after another, and they all seemed to have the same weaknesses or if they were strong in one area they were weak in another and they just did not reach their own people and that says to me, what are we doing there?

RV: Well, the reason I asked that question was because a lot of people today, veterans and others say that well we were fighting with one arm tied behind our back and if we had just been able to increase the tempo of the war, increase the firepower then we could have won the war in a month versus.

RS: Yes, yes. Well, you know obviously we could have won more battles if we did not have that one hand tied behind our back, which we had but the flip side is what were we doing there in the first place? You know what were we really protecting? It was like we had one puppet regime after another and its, you’ve got to make a difference
there. You know we made some difference, you know we went in and there was some road building and bridge building and things like that that helped things move from one end of the country to the other, you know and in some ways it made life a little bit easier for some of the people and if we could have done more of the humanitarian kinds of things that would have built up people’s support of a government that they had a loyalty to, that they had something to live for and to die for you know, but if you have nothing then what difference does it make who’s in charge.

RV: Do you think that the United States leadership suffered militarily and politically? Do you think there was a problem there?
RS: Oh yes I think we got a black eye out of that whole deal just in terms of our government and our military because you know some of the decisions that were made were military decisions and they were not good, they were not good decisions.

RV: Do you think the United States learned any lessons from Vietnam?
RS: Oh, I’d like to think so. I’m not totally convinced that we ultimately have. I mean not when you look at the Iraqi situation today and I struggle with that one.

RV: Really. Tell me about that, what do you see, what are the parallels?
RS: Again, you know I, we want to eliminate somebody whose in a power position who we feel threatened by, but and in this particular case we’re going to be the bullies, we’re going to go in and take him out and you know I’m not sure his people are in support of that even though he’s a tyrant. Again, the question becomes one of why are we doing this? Is it political; is it economic? You know what is the real reason we’re doing this? And I’m not in favor of it at this point. I think they’ve cut short the negotiating process and the inspection process and all of that.

RV: Do you think this is a reflection on lessons not learned then in Vietnam?
RS: In some ways it’s a different scenario and in some ways its not. You have to kind of look at what you consider to be the parallels and what are not and there are some ways it’s quite different at this point, today. Time will tell down the road you know what happens.

RV: Looking back at your service, your personal service, what do you remember most about it?
RS: What do I remember most about it? Well, I remember the time spent away from home, time spent away from loved ones and the conditions that we served under. I don’t spend a lot of time thinking about it I guess. I realize that the pictures and things, I have an album here on the desk and I hadn’t looked at that in years, and when you said you were going to be talking to me about it I went back and looked at some of the pictures and there are other pictures that are, and slides that are in a box up in the attic that haven’t been looked at probably in twenty years.

RV: How do you feel about your service today?

RS: I feel I did it with honor. You know I was asked to, I was called upon to go and do this, and I served and I did it to the best of my ability. Granted it was a different circumstance than some, you know I wasn’t specifically asked to go out and to go on to patrol and shoot people. You know I was in keeping equipment up and that type of thing and I did receive the Army Commendation Medal for my work and some other things, and I guess I felt as long as I was there I was going to do the best job possible. And I tried to treat the people there, you know the Vietnamese people with respect when I was there.

RV: What do you think was the most significant thing you learned while you were there in Vietnam?

RS: I would have to say that to learn a respect for people. I think we need to learn about people who are different from us, whose culture is different and respect that, and realize we’re all on this planet together. And it’s a small one and it’s getting smaller and I don’t think there’s room for this armed conflict that’s an old way of doing things. I just think that the world is now too small for that. The consequences of war are much more far reaching than they ever were when you look at nuclear bombs and you look at biological chemical warfare and those kinds of things that can bring such devastation, and it kind of takes on. You know in any war civilians are always killed, and I think its going to get worse in war in the future. You know we had an old saying that we around, we had a hundred things about the war in Vietnam and one of those was “friendly fire isn’t.” You know you get killed by a bomb even if it’s a “friendly bomb” or a friendly bullet you know fired by your own side, and so “friendly fire isn’t.”

RV: Do you remember any of the other sayings you had?
RS: Oh, gosh. “If everything is going according to your plan, according to your battle plan, watch out, it’s an ambush.” Its just little witticisms like that you know that.

RV: Is there anything that you would change about your Vietnam experience?

RS: Change about it, no, would I want to do it over again, no. Am I glad I got through it and got home? You bet I am. I don’t know, as I would ever want to do it again. You know some guys come home and they say, “Well, you know send us over, we’ll make it right.” I never felt that way. You know its like; I don’t want to do it.

RV: How do you think the war most affected your life?

RS: Oh, I think in some ways it gave me a greater appreciation for life. It gave me a greater appreciation for different viewpoints. One of the first churches I served, a young man in the congregation had become a conscientious objector during the war, and he served out his time as a nurse in a hospital, and I believe it was a veteran’s hospital and was given the dirtiest jobs to do even though he was qualified as a male nurse. One of those early ones, and you know was really looked down upon because he was a CO and by the time I got to be his pastor I respected him for that. I respected him for the fact that he bore up under that. You know I mean he toughed it out and did it, he didn’t run away from it and he didn’t cry, “Oh, poor me because I’m a CO and everybody’s picking on me.” You know he did his job and I respect him for that and I respect him for being able to have that conviction to do that and I would have that for anybody who does that today. I even have a respect for those who went off to Canada, and I think it was the right thing to do to welcome them home after a time. It was, it was not an easy time in our country and you know those of us that felt the call to a duty even though we may not have liked the duty, we went off and those who felt called to object it all did that, and those who felt they needed to run away ran away.

RV: What would you tell the young generation today about the Vietnam War?

The kids who, you know the high school and college kids or a little bit older who have really no understanding of what really what happened during them.

RS: For them it’s like ancient history. I’ve spoken to a few groups over the years, and it was like, they just can’t imagine what it was like and I guess my response is, learn what’s going on around you, you know. Keep up with current events and be aware of what’s happening in your world politically and get involved and get involved in it. Don’t
be just a bystander and in some sense I was kind of a bystander in my world when I was
growing up, and didn’t take an active role in it and didn’t understand all of the intricacies
of what was going on. And try to get them to develop a sense of respect for those who
did go, you know their grandfathers who served.

RV: Right. How did a boy like you who as you just described yourself was a
spectator growing up, how did that boy become the man who went to Vietnam?

RS: Well, again out of that sense of duty, you know that you were called to do
and so you did it and now that you’re, you know, and now that I have come through it
and have you know continued to grow and develop since then and have a better
understanding of the world around me and tend to get more involved in my world than I
once did. But it was a, it was a short step from my upbringing to go into the service. I
mean it was, and again a large part of that was probably that my father was 4F so he
never served in World War II, but several of his brothers did and that kind of a situation
was viewed as a very honorable one because of the world situation at that time and what
they were fighting for and all of that. And the fact that they came home victorious you
know, there was a winning to that one and at the time you know we were called to go and
serve.

RV: Do you remember how you felt in April 1975 when South Vietnam fell?

RS: It was, it was tough. It was tough and what was tough about it was the images
on TV of people left behind and just a concern for those people. You know the people
that had worked with us, the people that had relied on us for protection and all of a
sudden we weren’t there and you just knew the devastation that was going to happen. I
mean you could just, you knew that a lot of those people were not going to survive and
that was hard to take, that was really hard to take. Any of those kinds of things just really
strike at my core; you know I, to see people left behind and know that a government is
going to eliminate them. It’s just, its horrible.

RV: Have you had any contact with Vietnamese here in the United States; you
said you did have some in one of your congregations?

RS: No, not in my congregation but in the community there were, there was a
fairly strong Vietnamese community in the Binghamton area, a lot of them had resettled
there when they were able to get over. I hadn’t had a lot of contact with them, very
limited in that. Since then our church had gotten involved, here in Jamestown we had
done some refugee resettlement, but it was people from Kosovo and Bosnia that we
helped to resettle in the community, but again people leaving because of war and wanting
to have a new life, wanting to have life in a safe environment.

RV: Would you ever want to go back to Vietnam today?

RS: [Laughs] Its just really, I have to chuckle at that question because for years
my standard was, and you know as I talked about the R & R kind of a thing, that my
thought was once I get out of here I’m never going back and I had said that, you can’t
count the number of times I said that and meant it. And then here about a year ago I
started working on putting together a sabbatical study leave. I’m going to be on a
sabbatical study leave this summer for four months and I actually thought about going
back to Vietnam, and had gotten some prices and had looked at some grants. The Lily
Foundation is funding sabbaticals for clergy, and I had thought if I could qualify for one
of those I might go back, and my thing was to go back and to take my wife with me
because she had, you know she experienced Vietnam from her side and me being away
and being stateside and you know we’re still together after thirty-five years. So I thought
that would be something that might be very meaningful to go back and do that, it’s not
going to happen. The grant process just got, it was too intensive a process in too short a
time frame, it had all to be submitted like a year ahead of time and I should have had
about a year to work on it prior to that and I didn’t, I had a couple of months and it just
didn’t work out. So I’m not going back. But I thought hey, you know it would have been
something to go back and to see what was happening, to see what was the country was
like and go to some of the places I had been, I thought it might have been kind of healing
and educational to do.

RV: Is it out of the question now?

RS: It’s out of the question now, yes. Yes, financially it’s just beyond the scope
of what I can do.

RV: What books have you read on the Vietnam War, if any, have you read about
the war, tried to?

RS: Oh, yes. Stanley Karnow’s book is one of the, I think is a must read because
I think it takes one through the whole process of the earlier years, you know he gives the
early history of the country. He gives the history with the French involvement; he does
not neglect things like the massacre of the Vietnamese people by their one people. Those
are details that are in there and I think anybody studying that needs to do that and I guess
they did that whole PBS series was based on that book wasn’t it?

RV: Yes.
RS: There was a whole, like thirteen hours of video that they did. That was one
of the classics that I think is a must read. There are other things, I’ve got books on my
shelves, Nam: A Pictorial History, I’ve got An Eyewitness History of the Vietnam War
through Associated Press, you know the books that were written, oh gosh what are some
of the titles, I can’t even think of all of them. What was the one that McNamara did?

RV: Which one, the more recent one?
RS: Yes.
RV: The apologetic one?
RS: Yes, yes I read that one. I read numerous books on.
RV: So you don’t shy away from it?
RS: No, I don’t shy away from it.
RV: Okay, how about movies on Vietnam?
RS: Seen them all.
RV: Yes, what’s your opinion?
RS: Sometimes they were overdone I think anyway. You know I’ve, I guess
everyone that’s come out I’ve seen, and realize that in some of them you know they’re
just trying to give you the stereotypical composite view of the whole thing and so you
know within a two hour stretch you’re going to get everything. The one that believe it or
not, that touched me the closest was Robin Williams in Good Morning, Vietnam.
RV: Why?
RS: I think in part that situation more paralleled my situation. I think just because
I was not out in the field, so I did not have firsthand the experience of you know the
group in Platoon or in some of those other portrayals. I identified more with the types of
background settings that Robin Williams was in. But you know in most of them there is a
sense of realism. But I have seen them all and I can watch them and as I tell my wife,
you know its limited. You see the war on the screen but that’s different from being in the
war when its 360 degrees around you and over and under you and all of that, and I guess
that’s why I can watch those things and it doesn’t bother me because I know its right
there. And I think in some senses that as a public, when we rely upon the media, we’re
kind of protected from some of it and we probably need to be. When the Gulf War was
on I turned on the TV and watched segments so I would know what was happening, but I
could not be glued in front of the TV set for twenty-four hours, you know or hours on end
that some people were. I think you get sucked into that and you have to break away from
it. It becomes too much, its too much overplay, the terrorist attack on New York City,
you know we saw that imagery over and over and over again. Well after so many times of
that I turned that off, you know it happened. It was a terrible thing to have happen but I
don’t need to relive it you know over and over again. What it’s going to do to me as a
person?

RV: Do you think that stuff becomes embedded in one’s psyche or in their mind
and then it just becomes a part of them if they just continue to bombard themselves with
it?

RS: Yes, it can be because you allow yourself, either you allow yourself to be
bombarded with it by the continuously watching it, it can, I think it can suck you in and
then you know you almost feel as if you are in the midst of it and I don’t think that does
anybody any good you know to get sucked into that. I want to know what’s going on.
I’m not isolationist; I don’t ignore what’s happening. I’ll watch the newscast but then I
want to walk away from it and you know, deal with what has to be dealt with, and if it
means thinking about what’s happening and why we’re doing and what we’re doing or
thinking about how you address a problem, you know you do that but you don’t just
relive the event over and over.

RV: Have you ever been to the Wall in Washington?

RS: Yes.

RV: What was your experience like there?

RS: I’ve been there numerous times. The very first time I went, I went with a
group of clergy. We were on a, we were in Washington for some event and had a chance
to take a tour and that’s one of the sights I chose to go to.

RV: Was this before ’87, before your coming out of the closet?
RS: I think this was after that, yes.
RV: Did they know you were a vet, I guess is what I’m getting at?
RS: One of the guys did, I’m not sure everybody knew at that point because it was right along in the same time frame, you know it was part of a process I suppose of coming out and as I, I remember walking down into the center of the monument and just feeling so overwhelmed, it was like there was this heaviness and it was really emotional and it was like I couldn’t get away from there. One of the other ministers who had been a military chaplain did know that I was a ‘Nam vet, and he took by the hand and walked me up out of there and I needed that. It was such an emotional time that, and I was just feeling this tremendous weight while I was there, and I was below the ground level, you know you’re down in that deepest point and it just, it really struck me. It almost incapacitated me for a bit, but he walked me up out of that and then talked about it later. And since then I’ve been able to go back and I’ve been with others and I always say, “If it’s your first time there, you need somebody to be with you.” I think its very important for vets the first time they go, for family members the first time they go, to go with somebody and maybe somebody whose been there before because they can kind of monitor your emotional being I think, and I think that’s important to have somebody there. I’ve been back probably five or six times I guess. I’ve made trips to the Wall and I’ve been to the moving Walls that we’ve had in the communities for events.
RV: Has your experience there been different, the moving Walls versus the main memorial?
RS: Mine personally has been. You know its, its not quite as moving an experience but its still a meaningful experience and I’ve been there for others who will probably never get to the real Wall and so it becomes their experience.
RV: Well, Reverend Schaffer, is there anything else that you want to add to our conversation today?
RS: Oh, golly I think I probably just covered about everything. I’m glad I got home, glad I survived it, wouldn’t want to do it over again. Hopefully I’ve learned some things you know from that experience, I’m glad I can function as well as I do. I know some of the guys that came home with injuries that prevented them from functioning. I know some guys that came home that you know with mental injuries, that just couldn’t
handle it afterwards, and I weep in my heart for them and if there are those opportunities
to help fellow vets I do that. I don’t know if you know the Catholic minister, Reverend
Salois?

RV: No, sir.

RS: He served with the 199th Infantry I believe in a similar time frame that I did,
and came out and I guess made a pledge on the battlefield that if he survived he would
become a priest and he did and he has. He formed some years ago a group called the
National Conference of Vietnam Veteran Ministers.

RV: Yes, right.

RS: And I’m a member of that group. I have met him over the years and what
not.

RV: Do you do ministry to vets specifically or do you try to seek them out in your
congregations?

RS: I try to seek them out in my congregation and I’ve always served churches
where there’s been a few vets. I try to minister to the vet community. I’m a member of
the local VVA and try to go to their meetings and try to be there for the guys. Life
member of the organization of Vietnam Veterans in Binghamton, and I was actively their
chaplain while I was in that area and once in a while I still go back and attend one of their
events. Once in a while I’ll write something for their newsletter. In fact here, oh six
months ago I guess they were doing an overnight bonfire, an event and asked if I could
write a prayer you know to be used at that event and I did that. So I try to still minister
wherever I can to the ‘Nam vets.

RV: Let me ask you a question about your profession and your experiences and
your attitudes toward war. How, as a minister and as someone who is a Christian
minister, preaching the gospel, how can you talk about that and talk about war, what do
you say to people about this, such different extremes, where one is a very peaceful
religious thing, obviously, and the other is destroying life—how do you deal with that?

RS: It’s, it’s very difficult, but I encourage people. In fact we’re, in a couple of
weeks, we are in the midst of a series of Bible studies, living out one’s faith and in the
scriptures there are various places where we are called to live out our faith in the world in
which we are, and how do we do that under these circumstances and one of the things
we’re going to do is look at the church’s statement on a just war and a just peace and look
back in the history of the Christian church. How did Christians in the second century
deal with war? You know there’s a precedent there as to how they dealt with it and to be
aware of those things, and I always encouraged people to read this part or to read that part
or to study up on this and then look at where you are today and how does it play out. Are
there things that disturb you about that or are there other things you think you can be
doing you know to, in this process so that you, it doesn’t just become automatic. You
know somebody does something to us so we’re going to go over and retaliate. We’re
going to disrupt the lives of many, many innocent people. We’re going to devastate their
country and for what reason? You know and to seriously look at some of the heart to
heart issues. Its never easy, its never a simple yes, simple no that we ought to do this, we
shouldn’t do this, there’s a lot more to it. We don’t often get the time to spend working
that out I think, that’s the thing. You know our government leadership says, “Let’s go,
we’ve got to go do this.” Well, wait a minute, more than wait a minute, let’s wait a
lifetime and talk about some of these things as to the consequences of it or the cost of it.
You know the cost of the lives of the veterans that return home, you know and sometimes
our veterans have been neglected and the Desert Strom folks have found that out. You
know sometimes you have to fight for every little thing you get because they have
illnesses that they don’t know what caused them. They don’t know why they got them
but they got them, whether they’re psychological illnesses or whether they’re down to
earth viruses and bacteria or whatever, I mean they got them. And they deserve to be
cared for and to be made as well and as whole as possible, and that hasn’t always been
there. And the ‘Nam vets have fought for it. The World War II vets had to fight for their
care. You look back in our history, the Civil War vets, the Revolutionary War vets; you
know they all had to state their case. It wasn't automatic that you were taken care of, so
all that has to be part of that process too. I don’t know if that’s totally answered your
initial question.

RV: Well, it certainly does address it, absolutely. I don’t know if that question
can be answered, its kind of a trick question to a point but you certainly did address the
issue. Is there anything else that you want to talk about?
RS: No, I think that pretty much covers it I guess. I could go on and on about a lot
of, you know a lot of details and things, but I was wondering about like pictures and
things, you know whether that would be something that would help with anybody that
does the research or not.

RV: Absolutely, absolutely. We can talk about that. Let me go ahead and sign
off. This will conclude our oral history interview with the Reverend Richard Schaffer,
thank you very much sir.

RS: Okay.