Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins with the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University beginning an oral history interview with Dr. Robert Kreger. Today is the twenty-eighth of October 2005. I am in the Special Collections Building on the campus of Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas, and Bob is speaking to me by telephone from California. First of all, Bob, thank you for your time. I appreciate this very much. I want to welcome you to the Oral History Project and ask you just to confirm that the Vietnam Archive has your permission to record the interview and to make it available for scholarship in the future, to researchers on a public basis.

Robert Kreger: Well, Laura it’s a pleasure to be participating in the program and I have certainly waited for the interview and I understand the purpose of the interview and I do give my permission for it to be used for those purposes.

LC: We appreciate that, Bob, and particularly your time—which we know is valuable—but your sense of generosity and willingness to share your recollections and observations, of course, is very important to us and important I’m sure to people that neither of us will ever meet. In that way it’s kind of an act of faith. Bob, let me ask you first just if you would to give us some basic biographical data. Where were you born, Bob, and when, and tell me a little about your family?

RK: Well, I was born actually October 27 of 1946, San Diego, California.
LC: Happy birthday then.

RK: Thank you. I’m one of three siblings. I’m the middle baby. I have an older sister who is [nine] years older than I and I have a younger brother who is two-and-a-half years younger than I. My father and mother were very typical middle-class hard-working American folks. My father was a Navy veteran of duty in the Pacific, and he was born and raised in the Chicago area. My mother is basically out of the New Jersey area. They met, fell in love, started their family. My sister was born before World War II and Dad went off into the Navy leaving behind his daughter and wife to contend with that. He came back after his duty in the Pacific, which according to him was somewhat harried and dangerous for him, in the job that he had in the Navy.

LC: Well, Bob, would you tell something about this? First of all, did he tell you about it when you were growing up or when you were older?

RK: No. Not much at all, Laura. Not much at all. Dad was a very secretive person about that and he didn’t reveal much at all. My recollection is that, as I said, he didn’t talk to us kids much about it and he may have shared stories with his friends in the neighborhood, but it did have a lot to say about things that would happen later in my life to know that my father had been in the Navy and had been through World War II.

LC: What did you find out about his service? You mentioned he was in the Pacific.

RK: Well, he was on a destroyer escort. In fact, I have a picture of it in my garage at home.

LC: What was the name of the ship?

RK: I don’t recall. I think it was the USS [Cavallaro] but when we continue with the interview I’ll probably have that name.

LC: That’s fine. Sure. Absolutely—that would be great if you could pitch it in later on. That’d be great.

RK: He was an electrician’s mate and responsible for maintenance of the ship and keeping the ship running. But the ship was under attack a couple of times. I think there was even some reference by Dad to being torpedoed and nearly being sunk by a torpedo. So my recollection is that he had seen enough of world war, enough of danger and bloodshed and tragedy that it had shaped his personality somewhat and when he
came back from his experience and how he then raised his two sons. A very strict
disciplinarian who didn’t tolerate any monkeyshines at all by my brother or I.

LC: Your sister is quite a bit older?
RK: My sister was [nine] years older.

LC: So was she kind of given a little bit freer reign?
RK: Oh, that’s an—

LC: That’s an—okay.
RK: That’s an interesting question.

LC: Okay. I just wondered if—

RK: No, that’s fine. That’s a fair question. I mentioned earlier about being the
middle baby, and again it’s all wrapped up in my life story. As I viewed myself as a
teenage boy and then as a young adult later on, in my mind my sister was the pretty one
who could twirl a man around her finger and get just about anything she needed including
good jobs and the types of things a young eighteen-, nineteen-year-old high school
graduate, good looking girl, could do. She graduated high school, never went to college,
but was successful in getting work and getting good work and being an independent
woman. So I looked upon her that way. My younger brother was the class president. He
was the intellectual in the family and I was the middle baby who had pimples and liked to
play baseball and chase the girls.

LC: Trying to kind of figure out where you stood in this whole—
RK: Where I stood in that. Yes.

LC: Yeah. Middle kid stuff. Yeah.
RK: Now, continuing with that—
LC: Yes, sir.

RK: I mean, in the same vein perhaps, Laura. Gosh I’m—well, see I was thrown
out of high school. I got expelled from high school in my senior year. In those days they
had what they called a senior banquet and I think they still do that in high school these
days. We had a senior banquet and myself and a couple other kids thought that it would
be smarty and cutesy to bring alcohol to the senior banquet. So I went up to my
neighbor’s house and borrowed a four-ounce bottle of vanilla extract and lied that my
mother needed it for baking and went out underneath my dad’s avocado tree in the
backyard and poured it out, snuck it in, and filled it up with gin. The evening of the
senior banquet, after we’d had our meal and we were getting ready to board a boat called
the Bahia Belle to take a tour around San Diego Bay, the senior class counselor, Charles
Moss—bless his heart—was frisking all the boys. It was a Thursday evening. He found
the liquor in my suit coat breast pocket and I was expelled that moment. I wasn’t
suspended. I wasn’t sent home. I wasn’t told to throw the bottle out or empty the booze.
I was just simply expelled.

LC: What high school was this?
RK: That was Mount Miguel High School.

LC: Mount Miguel?
RK: Mount Miguel, San Diego, California—actually, it’s Spring Valley, California.

LC: In Spring Valley. Okay. What year would you have—?
RK: Well, it was in my senior year so that would have been—this was probably
in the spring of 1964.

LC: That’s pretty hard cheese for—
RK: Yeah, I know. Well, after a week of negotiation we, the three of us who
were expelled—I wasn’t the only one caught. The three of us boys were, of course, were
all in cahoots together. We were allowed to come back to class. When we returned to
class—I remember as if it were yesterday—the senior English teacher, Mrs. Hall was her
name, took one look at the three of us boys as we walked into her classroom and she said,
“If you boys are back I’m gone.” She walked down to the principal’s office and
demanded that we not be allowed to return to class. He acquiesced. The three of us
finished our high school in the continuation setting. She—just the power at that time and
she prevailed and we were gone. My senior year in high school was a turning point for
me in my life because, although I certainly didn’t do it intentionally, I had shamed my
family and embarrassed them. My sister actually said to me one afternoon, “How could
you do such a thing to our family?” I didn’t have any answer for her at the time. So the
summer after my graduation from continuation school, that’s when at age eighteen,
seventeen-and-a-half, eighteen, my father and I really got at odds with one another. He
threatened nearly everyday of that summer to throw me in the Navy, and put me in the
Navy and put me in the Navy. That’ll make you a man. That’s going to grow you up sort
of thing. As rebellious as a kid as I was I consistently fought against that and fought
against that, and at the same time seeing all my friends from high school go on to college.
So I began to argue for the opportunity to go to college and specifically I wanted to go to
a place called Grossmont College, which was a two year community college in El Cajon,
California, which had just opened up. I argued and I argued and I was able to prevail, but
my father said to me, “Look, if you’re just going to go to school to fart around you might
just as well not go.” I said, “No, Daddy. I’m going to be a serious student. I’m ready to
be a serious student.” Well, I started there and within three semesters realized that I
certainly was not as serious a student as I thought I was going to be.

LC: Had you been much of a student before the episode?
RK: No. No. I was just an average kid—Cs and Ds. Well, Bs and Cs in high
school. I got a D in high school geometry which didn’t please my dad much either.

LC: I think you’re not alone there.
RK: I was just an average kid.

LC: Was it that it didn’t grab you or the teaching? I mean, you’re a
professional—

RK: Oh, you mean the—

LC: You’re a professional instructor now and it’s worth it to mention that you’re
a professor now. I just wonder now looking back at your high school curricular and
scholastic experiences, was it that the content wasn’t there, the teaching wasn’t good, or
were you kind of not associating with being a student as the thing you wanted to do then?

RK: Oh, yeah. Clearly the blame for my lack of achievement in high school is
clearly with me. My faculty at Mount Miguel, the administrators at Mount Miguel and
the support that we had was excellent. I certainly don’t have any suspicion that the
curriculum or—I mean, I was in college prep classes. I was college bound, I should say,
at least in theory. My parents thought that I would end up in college. I guess I could say
that I was kind of a floater. I mean, I wanted to be in social groups with the men, the
boys. I wanted to have the prettiest girlfriends.

LC: What about sports?
RK: Well, I played varsity baseball for one year. Then I ran varsity track. I thought of myself as pretty athletic. I was too small to play high school football because we had some big brutes who kept beating me up.

LC: Now by too small, do you mean—

RK: Physically.

LC: Like weight wise you just weren’t—


LC: This is a tough thing in California. Football is a big deal like it is here in Texas.

RK: Yeah. Yeah. So, you know, I tried to fit in in high school years. I was always kind of on the fringe. Never quite in with the, I guess they say now, the A list of people at parties. Always trying to live up to my father’s expectations, which although he never really explicitly said to me, “This is what I expect from my son,” I had an idea of what he wanted, perhaps always seemingly falling short of that.

LC: What about your mom? Was she a central figure in this, too?

RK: Yeah. Mother was just a loving woman who cared for her children dearly and tried to do the best that she could to, well, certainly to provide for us, shelter us, and give us the nurturing that 1940s and 50s, 60s housewives did for their children.

LC: Sure. Did she ever work outside the house?

RK: Only very briefly at the beginning of their marriage. Once they moved to California, no.

LC: Of course, as you say, she had children to look after.

RK: Yes. She was the consummate housewife. She kept her home clean and warm and loving and prepared the meals for us, devoted to my father. My father was devoted to her and their life together was a model for the three of us kids. My sister and I often talk about the fact that the three of us kids were not really always a part of their lives because it’s almost as if they made a distinction between a life together as husband and wife and a life together as parents with children.

LC: Interesting. Interesting.

RK: For example, I mean, I tell the story to some of my—I mean, us kids never went in their bedroom. It wasn’t an open bedroom. It wasn’t necessarily any sexual
connotation to it. It was just kind of like the Taj Mahal. I mean, it was the sacred
ground.

LC: They just had their space.
RK: It’s where conversations were held. It’s where lovemaking probably went
on. It’s where decisions were made that we weren’t privy to. I mean, wow. It was a
sanctified place.

LC: Power center of the house.
RK: Yeah. It was. It was the power center. Well, the upshot of that is that my
dad finally allows me to go to college and three semesters into college I realize that
things are not working out the way I had hoped that they would. Being on the periphery
of sports people in high school I found myself Monday morning, March the 7th of 1966 at
about eleven o’clock or so, sitting in the student union at Grossmont College with Billy
Taylor. Now, Billy Taylor was a year older than I. He was the California State wrestling
champion at 112 pounds four years in a row. He was one of our idols. I mean, it was an
honor just to sit at the table with Bill Taylor and watch him eat a hamburger. So we
idolized him. So there I found myself sitting at a table and Billy and I were talking and
eating a burger and French fries. In the background on the student PA system Barry
Sadler’s record, *The Ballad of the Green Berets*, was playing. Bill and I got into a
contest, a machismo sort of discussion about who was tougher, he or I, and who could be
a Green Beret faster, he or I.

LC: Oh, boy. Mm-hmm.
RK: I quit school that day. I went to the admissions office Monday afternoon
after lunch. Actually, we made a five-dollar bet. We shook hands and bet each other five
dollars that one of us would become a green beret before the other. At that moment
Laura, I mentally quit school. I went to the admissions office. I took Ws in all of my
classes and I withdrew. I didn’t tell my parents. I went home Monday evening. Quite
honestly, I went down to Tijuana and I got drunk and I got laid and sobered up Tuesday
and drove to Los Angeles, signed all the papers, took the oath, took all the physicals, and
drove back to San Diego Tuesday evening and kept pretty much to myself. Didn’t say
much, didn’t even tell my mom and dad. Wednesday when I woke up and Dad was
getting ready to go to work and Mom was putzing around in the kitchen the topic of why
aren’t you going to school came up. I said, “I’m not going to school because I have to go to the bus depot at four o’clock this afternoon.” “What? What are you doing at the bus depot?” “I’ve joined the Army. I’ve got to be at Ft. Ord tomorrow.” Holy crap! My mother at that moment, her life must have just come to a stop. She couldn’t speak. She simply could not talk with me anymore. My father looked at me in absolute utter disbelief and he said to me, “You what?” I said, “I joined the Army. I’m going to Ft. Ord tomorrow. I got to be on a bus tonight at four o’clock this afternoon at this Greyhound station in San Diego.” His comment was, “Well, I don’t understand that. For somebody who loves to keep as clean as you do and eat as well as you do why in the hell didn’t you go in the Navy? You can have three good meals a day and you’ll be clean but, no, you’re going to go in the Army.” That was one of the last conversations that we ever had [on that subject]. Now, by the time the day had gone on and he must’ve called in sick that day or made some excuse not to go into work, but we didn’t communicate. I mean, I didn’t go around making a bunch of goodbyes with all my friends. I stayed at home and I just kept to my own business in my own room, but I remember at the bus station how we tried to say goodbye to each other and Dad just couldn’t talk. He was crying. I’m crying now but I wasn’t crying then because I was a nineteen-year-old kid. I was off on a quest. I was like Chris in the movie *Platoon*. I didn’t know what the hell I was getting in for but the Army had become my circus and I was running off to join the circus and prove myself manly vis-à-vis becoming a Green Beret. Prove myself manly in the eyes of my father I think is the ultimate psychological motive there. Mom couldn’t barely speak and Dad barely did at all. We hugged, we kissed, we said our goodbyes, and I got on the bus and that was it. Now all these years later with sons and grandsons and stepsons now, I can only imagine what my father was going through knowing that his oldest son had just joined the Army which possibly meant certain death for his oldest son.

LC: In 1966? Yes.


LC: Bob, before I pursue what happened when you got off the bus, let me ask a little bit of background information that will help people maybe see how perhaps crushing this was for your parents. How much did you know or how much were you paying attention to American involvement in Southeast Asia, for example, at this time?
RK: Almost none.

LC: Really?

RK: Really. Yeah. Almost none. I certainly was aware that we were at war. I had never been to that time politically active. I hadn’t—and see that’s another interesting question, Laura, and I am glad that you asked that because subsequent to that in my professional life here at the college I give talks to my students sometimes about my involvement in Vietnam—

LC: Just to note, Bob works at Cerritos College where he’s the chair of the Earth Sciences Department. Go ahead, Bob.

RK: One question that the students ask often is, “Well, how do you think about Jane Fonda? How do you feel about Jane Fonda?” For me personally—and this is just Bob Kreger’s personal view—I don’t begrudge Jane Fonda being Jane Fonda and doing what Jane Fonda did. Now, I think it was bad judgment for her to go to North Vietnam and be photographed and doing the things that she did. I think it was very bad judgment and for that I’m upset that she did it. But what I’m not upset about is the fact that, although she may have been born with that silver spoon, in her mouth she made a political stance and she made a decision in her mind based on information, whether it was flawed or not flawed, and she had the moxie to stand by her convictions. I didn’t, Laura. I didn’t. I didn’t know one thing from the other, as I indicated. I didn’t know what the situation was in Vietnam. I didn’t know the level of activity. I didn’t know any of the economic or the political or the social implications of it. I was just off on a quest, as I said a moment ago, in my own little fantasy world of going off and making myself a man.

LC: Do you think, Bob—

RK: And for that I regret it. I mean I don’t know that I would have decided not to join the Army if I had been smarter about it at the time. I don’t know. Go ahead.

LC: Well, I mean, there are a lot of people who would want to come right in behind there and say it’s never a bad idea to volunteer to serve the country. So there’s that, but I was going to ask whether you think that if on the seventh of March 1966 you hadn’t heard the Ballad of the Green Berets in the company that you did that some other quest might have emerged for you and have you ever thought about what it might have been?
RK: Oh, goodness. That’s an interesting question. Yes.

LC: Run off to Alaska and, you know?

RK: Yeah. The fact that the notion of fate and things like that—I mean, the fact that at that moment at that place there was that song playing and the heroism and the machismo involved in that song and the notion of a hundred men trying to make it but only three. Here I am across the table from Bill Taylor who had been so successful physically in high school and had the girls and here was my chance to prove myself to be one of those three and, by golly, I’ll show them. I’ll show them that I can do something maybe that they couldn’t do. Now, if that hadn’t happened I probably would not have stayed at Grossmont College much longer. As you said, I probably would have found something else. It could have been, you know, a quest up into Alaska or another frontier land of some sort to in some fashion perhaps try to distinguish myself, atone for the perceived shame I had brought to my family as a high school senior. I had to make it up somehow.

LC: It sounds like getting away, though, was going to be a part of this function regardless of which way you went getting out of there was probably going to be part of it.

RK: Yes. I believe so.

LC: To redeem yourself you have to leave and do something and then maybe come back and be appreciated or something like that.

RK: Yeah. I believe so. I believe so.

LC: This is really interesting. So when I do talk with my students here I tell them. I say, “Look. If you’re thinking about going in the military right now you better come talk to me because I’ve got some stupid adolescent behavior to tell you about.”

LC: Right and I’ve got some down-home truths that you might want to avail yourself of.

RK: Now, another thing that you did mention, I mean, in the conduct of our interview—I mean, I don’t know if it’s okay for me to interrupt with thoughts.

LC: It absolutely is and I hope that you always will.

RK: There was the aspect of patriotism involved. If anything, not having any knowledge of the consequences of my actions, not having any knowledge of the situation in Vietnam, in Southeast Asia, I do feel that it’s honest to say that I was acting
patriotically as I understood it at least at that time in my life as a nineteen-year-old kid. I felt I was doing the right thing by joining with other men to fight a cause. Now, right or wrong about the cause, that’s what I did not think about. For me the cause was just because it was American, if that makes any sense.

LC: It does. It does.

RK: So to some degree I certainly don’t think that my decision was completely impetuous. I mean, it was certainly impetuous behavior, there’s no doubt, but I think it was motivated by the thought that I had to kind of redeem myself in the eyes of my family and friends, find myself as a young man, as well, and while at the same time being a patriot—whatever that meant at that time.

LC: Was there much scuttlebutt amongst your friends or people hanging out in the student union, student lounge? Was there talk about the war at this time? Did you hear much about it if you can recall?

RK: Well, there was some.

LC: Or the draft?

RK: Yeah. I wasn’t involved. I became involved in it later with my younger brother, but at the time yes. We had—Grossmont College was not a hotbed of political activity.

LC: I would believe that.

RK: Most of us were young, white men and women from middle class, upper middle class, neighborhoods who had led reasonably sheltered, privileged lives. We didn’t have a large Hispanic population at the college. We didn’t have a large black population at the college. We didn’t have a group of hardcore political, hippy, pot-smoking, anti-war activists walking around agitating us, either.

LC: Right. This is still in early 1966.

RK: Yeah. This is the spring of ’66. So, yes, I’m sure that in political science classes on campus in other settings on and off campus there were discussions. One of my closest friends was a conscientious objector and was able to document it and was able to, as I said, document it so he was not drafted. He went the full process and didn’t have to go.

LC: Now, is this someone that you knew at the college?
RK: Oh, yeah. I’ve known him since we were—I don’t know—almost infants.

LC: Wow. Well, I’d like to ask a little bit more about that process later.

RK: Oh, sure. Sure.

LC: Yeah. That’s very interesting.

RK: He remains one of my closest friends, sure. Yeah. It’s strange. The three of us kids that palled around, the three of us—I mean, is it fair to tell names?

LC: If you feel they wouldn’t be uncomfortable with it, sure.

RK: Oh, I don’t know. Well—

LC: Well, why don’t we just say that you have a friend, very close friend.

RK: There are three friends who palled around in high school, three of us.

LC: Maybe you and I can talk about that off the record.

RK: Sure. One became a conscientious objector. The other, myself, joined the Army and the third, later, three years, I think, after I did or two, also joined the Army. So of the three of us when the three of us get together now as we approach sixty years of age when the three of us get together now our stories are pretty funny about the things we went through in high school and how our lives were changed by the things that we did, but we remain very close friends.

LC: Yeah. That’s interesting.

RK: I do not begrudge for one moment the fact that this young boy, closest friend of mine, did not have to go.

LC: I mean, it’s very interesting because it’s a microcosm of, you know, the absolute dissention inside the United States over issues arising from the war and how friends and families took different positions.

RK: Yes. That very same directly affected my family, directly. Well, shall I pursue that?

LC: Please do. Yes. Why don’t you just mention it now while we’re talking about it?

RK: Well, gosh, where can I go? Well, quickly, I’m sure we’ll come back to this. I went to basic training.

LC: Yes.

RK: Gosh, let me get the story straight.
Now, you went to basic training at Ft. Ord.

Went to basic training at Ft. Ord, California. All along the way at basic training, after the battery of tests that you take for your Army entrance and all those things, platoon sergeants and TAC (Training, Advising, and Counseling) officers reminded me from time to time that I had scored very well on these tests and that maybe I didn’t need to be cannon fodder in the Green Berets, but maybe I could do something else in the Army and so forth. I consistently said, “No I’m going to be in the Green Berets. No I’m going to be in the Green Berets.” So somewhere along the line they gave up on me, although I know that they didn’t. After basic then I went to Ft. Gordon, Georgia, for my advanced infantry training. It was there at Ft. Gordon, Georgia, toward the end of my advanced infantry training cycle that I learned that I was one month too young to enter Green Berets training that cycle. So I had to wait six weeks for that to happen. It was at that time also toward the end of the AIT (advanced infantry training) when I learned that I couldn’t go to Green Beret training. You had to be twenty by September of that year. I wouldn’t have been twenty until October so I missed it by a month or so. I remember that one of the TAC officers said to me, you know, “You can go to OCS (Officer Candidate School). You scored high enough to go to OCS. You could become an officer if you choose.” I guess it kind of hit me at that time, Laura, “Well, here is perhaps a better way to go about this sort of situation that I’ve gotten myself into in the Army.” I remember just like the Delta Airlines commercial that they ran a couple, three years ago. I was talking to my father in a telephone booth in one of the company areas there at Ft. Gordon. In the rain, talking to Dad, and I said to him, “Well, I can’t go to Green Beret training cause they tell me I’m too young but somebody told me I could go to OCS. What do you think? You think I should go to OCS?” He said to me, “If you think it will make you a better man, do so.” He hung up the phone. He didn’t want to get involved in this, but those were the words he wanted me to hear and those were the words he wanted me to contemplate and he just hung up on me. Darn him. But he forced me to think about it and that’s precisely what he wanted me to do. So I thought about it and I said, “Well, you know, it probably would make me a better man.” So I decided then that I would go to OCS.

He sounds like a very interesting guy.
RK: He was wise beyond his years.

LC: Very smart guy. Very smart guy, maybe not in every category, did everything right but that was actually—

RK: None of us ever did everything right, for sure.

LC: That’s for sure. Kids seem to see that more in their parents but that was quite a wise thing for him to kind of put it back on you but ask you to make a decision—

RK: Of course, at the time I didn’t understand that’s why he had hung up on me. I thought he was pissed off at me.

LC: Right. That’s another thing kids do with parents.

RK: Now that I realize what he was doing I think, well, probably—as you said, the wisest thing he could have done at that moment. So I went to OCS. I went to infantry OCS from—I’m getting to the other facts soon. I went to infantry OCS at—

LC: Where was this?

RK: At Ft. Benning, Georgia, and there I excelled. I mean, I excelled academically. I excelled physically. I was chosen at the end of the cycle to be one of the guys that leads the platoon as you make your eighteenth week parade.

LC: At the, essentially, graduation ceremony?

RK: Well, it’s a graduation ceremony into the final stage of your training. It’s called the eighteenth week parade.

LC: Which is quite an honor.

RK: Quite an honor.

LC: Yes, sir.

RK: I was feeling pretty good with myself. I got my commission as a brand new second lieutenant on the twenty-fifth of May of 1967, and Mom and Dad flew out to Georgia and participated in the ceremony.

LC: Really?

RK: Dad pinned one of the bars on me. That was very emotional for everybody.

LC: That must have been incredible.

RK: It was. Yeah. It was powerful. Well, subsequent to that—well, I should say concurrently with that my brother graduates from high school as president of his class.

LC: In that spring of 1967?
RK: Earlier. My brother finished high school in ’66, I think, and began college must have been—because he was two years behind me so he must’ve been—yeah, he finished in ’66 but began college in the fall of ’66. So by the time I got my commission in nearly a year later in ’67 he’d already been in college a year.

LC: Where was he going?

RK: He got an academic scholarship to Claremont College, one of the Claremont Colleges up here in the Los Angeles area.

LC: So he was a smarty.

RK: Oh, yeah. He was a smarty. So he moved away from home into a college life in ’66 and began to transform himself in to the antithesis of what his brother was.

(Editors note: Text and audio deleted.) Oh! My father was just going bonkers. He’s got one son—now, see this is when we came home on—when I came home on leave before I went to Vietnam—let’s see. Is that right? No. Yeah. I might be getting a little bit confused on some of my dates. Let me think it through for a moment. (Editors note: Text and audio deleted.) Well, he was transforming himself into this type of a person and I was transforming myself into this John Wayne-esque Green Beret, you know.

LC: Oh, yeah.

RK: My mom and dad are seeing their two sons going in these separate directions. I graduated from OCS there in May of ’67. Then I went to Airborne school and then I went to Green Beret school. So by August of 1967 when it was time for me to come home for a few days leave before I reported to my duty station at Ft. Bragg, in August of ’67 here I come back to the neighborhood Airborne qualified, second lieutenant, Green Beret. I was invincible. I was strutting all over that neighborhood. I visited the high school. Man, as many people as would look at me—I don’t think I ever took off my uniform. I walked everywhere I could and showed off ’cause I was proud. My brother’s home from college and boy we didn’t get into fist fights but it came to it almost because he’s representing all that I’m not and he represents—I suppose in the eyes of my parents—he represents the rotten part of society and here’s the other son who represents all this true blue (Editors note: Text and audio deleted) and I can only imagine what that did to my mom and dad and how that split.

LC: Let me ask a little bit about your brother.
RK: Sure.

LC: In addition to kind of moving into this, well, you said hippie lifestyle. Did he have the anti-war politics that went with that often but not always?

RK: Yes. Yeah. I don’t know to what degree he did but he was clearly—he was much more politically active than I ever was as a younger person. A better thinker about it—yeah. I mean, he just thought about it and then he—yes. The short answer is yes. He was politically active, although I don’t recall that he ever—of course, I might not have even known that he had ever participated in or organized public protests.

LC: Right. This is still, Bob, really quite early 1967 that the anti-war movement was really just starting to not only move on campuses but to also start to develop off campus. That was really only just in its infancy. Of course, people were in different places at different times and he may have been on a continuum that led him to more anti-war activism later on. I don’t know, but maybe not so much yet in 1967. It’s an interesting contrast though. Your parents must—

RK: Yeah. That’s actually the reason for that particular story was to illustrate our little family as a microcosm of what was happening in the greater American society because, I mean, right there in our little home and we had both ends, all ends of that spectrum.

LC: Well, Bob, can I ask you a couple of questions about the different early experiences that you had with the Army? First of all, can you tell me how you handled those early weeks of basic training back at Ft. Ord? Suddenly, of course, you probably have drill instructors in your face and you’ve got to do everything at a certain time and in a certain way. How did you adjust?

RK: Easily and happily.

LC: Really?

RK: It was for me, I perhaps use the phrase a dream come true. I fit in well. I never found anything that they did to us to be so offensive that I wouldn’t be able to stomach. I certainly didn’t like getting yelled at, no. I didn’t like some of the tactics that the drill sergeants used.

LC: Like?
RK: Well, you know, all the physical harassment and the berating that went on, and it certainly wasn’t that I was smart enough to understand why they did it. I just figured that’s what they did. But I had that goal ahead of me, that Green Beret infantry kind of goal. I kept focused on that, Laura, and it provided inspiration for me when things got rough.

LC: That’s so interesting. That’s so interesting.

RK: I never once thought about giving up. I mean it was tough, certainly, and I was homesick. Sure, I was homesick and I missed my family. I tried to fit in with the other men, but you see I joined. I was a RA (Regular Army) guy and a lot of the guys were draftees. I found myself trying to keep the fact that I had joined somewhat secret. I didn’t want my platoon mates to know that I was as gung ho as I was when they might not be because they had no choice but to join or not to join. They had no choice but to be there and I did have a choice and I had made that choice and I was going to stick by that choice. I scored in basic training—I got the highest score on the proficiency test. I’ve got a trophy at home about that. I got a picture of me getting that award. I got accelerated promotion to PFC (private first class). I was being fulfilled by my hard work, fulfilled psychologically. It just fed. It just snowballed. So I didn’t have—now, the toughest thing that happened to us in basic training, we had a young man who died of meningitis at Ft. Ord—in our company—wonderful young Hawaiian boy. His name was Randy King. He was as strong as an ox and before meals, before you went in the mess hall, you had to go through the bars, little bit of physical fitness on the bars. He fell off the bars. I believe it was a Wednesday that he fell off the bars. Hell, he was dead within a few hours. Of course, it just sent such a shockwave through the company. When they had determined that it was meningitis that he had died of then we were quarantined.


RK: So we spent the remainder of our basic training in quarantine and we were marched to a movie once and we were marched to a PX (post exchange) once, but the remainder of the time we never left the company compound. We could have visitors. Family and friends could visit. Of course, my family never came up because it was too far for them to travel, but husbands and wives could join and parents could visit their sons, but they were never allowed to leave the company area. We had to have white
strips of cloth sewn on our fatigue jackets, fatigue shirts, above our nametags to identify us as being in quarantine. I didn’t think of it at the time, but now that I look back it was like being in some kind of a Holocaust concentration camp.

LC: Yeah. You’re the Pariah trainees. Wow. Wow. That’s terrible that this young guy died. Had he had any trips to the infirmary or sick call before this? Do you know?

RK: Not to my knowledge. No.

LC: Gosh. What a terrible thing, and hard on the company. Did it unite you guys though?

RK: Yes, I think it did. I think it did.

LC: What a shame.

RK: Yeah, but back to the original question, I just thrived on it.

LC: You took to this really—

RK: Oh, I took to this like a fish to water, goodness, and all the other expressions like that.

LC: Right. That’s really astounding me because it’s such a contrast with what you described about your kind of more or less kind of aimlessly trying to figure out where you fit in and then—

RK: But see, that’s where I figured out I was going to fit in the best.

LC: The structure was certainly there.

RK: Yeah. It provided the structure that I needed.

LC: You moved in right in.

RK: I moved right in.

LC: Were you glad for your AIT assignment to Ft. Gordon, Georgia?

RK: Oh, no.

LC: Okay. (Laughs)

RK: Well, I don’t think anybody’s ever glad to go to Ft. Gordon, Georgia. Ft. Garbage, Georgia. That’s what they called it or used to call it. If God gives the world an enema the one place he’s going to [put it] is Ft. Gordon, Georgia.

LC: I have been there so I have a very clear idea of what you’re talking about.
RK: I don’t know how many locations where the Army was operating infantry AIT at that time.
LC: But several.
RK: Yeah, but I just wound up going to Ft. Gordon, so there I went. My time at Ft. Gordon was okay. I mean, I got a temporary promotion on what they called—well, I guess temporary promotion, I don’t really—they put those little sergeant stripes on me so I was a platoon sergeant for an AIT company.
LC: Which is again another kind of marker along the way of your proficiency and that you’re meeting the demand.
RK: Yeah, and the TAC sergeants were extremely tough on me because perhaps they saw in me some potential that I had not yet seen in me. I remember our platoon sergeant. Catsellas was his name, Sergeant Catsellas. Oh, he was—God he was tough. He would just drive me crazy.
LC: Do you know anything about his service background? Had he been in World War II or—?
RK: I do not know.
LC: Korea?
RK: He was a thin, wiry, mean SOB with a nearly shaven head. He drove a Thunderbird. I remember that. The interior of that Thunderbird was spotless to the point that he never wore his boots inside his car. He would always, when we went to the parking lot to leave duty for the day he would open up the trunk of his car and he would take off his boots and put them in the trunk of his Thunderbird. Then he would put on a pair of slippers and drive home. But he was, oh, God—he nicknamed me Sergeant Meatball. That was my nickname. Sergeant Meatball.
LC: Not a term of endearment presumably.
RK: He would get on that company bitch box when he was on CQ (charge of quarters) at about one, two, three A.M. in the morning. “Sergeant Meatball! The orderly room is dirty! Send me a detail!” Oh, God. So I got to get up and I got to roust two or three guys out of their bunks to go down and clean up the orderly room, which was perfectly clean to begin with but Sergeant Catsellas just had his way. I recall one time, Laura, I picked on the wrong guy to get him up out of bed—kid from New Jersey. Never
forget him. His name was Palminari. He was as big and strong as an ox and thick Italian
accent out of New Jersey. I sent him down with a couple other guys to clean the orderly
room and as the platoon sergeant I had my own private little room up those old World
War II-style barracks, the wooden ones. I had my own little room there at the top of the
second floor, and Palminari came back from that detail. By now I was back in the bunk
and I was half asleep, half awake waiting for them to return. He stood, this guy, he stood
at the front of my, at the door to my little room carrying this damned buffer. “God damn
it, Sergeant Kreger. Don’t you ever do that to me again.” He threw the buffer. I mean,
this guy was an ox. He throws this buffer probably eight feet through the air and it lands
on my bunk. If I hadn’t gotten out of the way it would have killed me or hurt me badly. I
learned right then and there I’m never going to send Palminari on another detail. That
was it. He was home free. He never had to do another thing as far as I was concerned in
AIT. No way. I knew he’d beat me up if I did it to him again so I wasn’t going to do
that. But yes, and then like I said, toward the end of the AIT was when I learned that—
this brings on another funny story. I learned that I was too young for the Green Berets
and that’s when I chose to go to OCS. They had to do the background search on me.
They found a misdemeanor charge that I had on my record while I was on one year
probation during which I joined the Army. The story there is, quickly, that one winter in
California right about the same time that I joined the Army, just a little bit before joining
the Army, again the three of us kids that hung out together plus a couple other guys we
were up in the Cuyamaca Mountains. We were throwing snowballs at moving vehicles.
Well, in the state of California that’s a misdemeanor. So out of nowhere is this California
Highway patrolman who arrests the three of us and we have to go to court. The fine at
that time was six months in jail and/or five-hundred-dollar fine. So we all thought we
were going to jail. Well, the judge looked at us and kind of laughed and he reduced the
fine to three dollars for each of us. We each had to pay three bucks. Then he put us on
one year’s probation laughingly saying, “It’s only gonna snow in California [once a] year
so stay out of trouble.” Well, during that year was when I joined and the recruiter told
me, the snake oil salesman Army recruiter, he tells me, “Ah, don’t worry about that
misdemeanor. They’ll never find that.” Well, sure as hell they found it.

LC: Oh, yeah. Yeah.
RK: When I’m about to go to OCS and get involved in OCS training and clearances and other types of things they find it. My entry into OCS was delayed about six weeks so I stayed there at Ft. Gordon and I went into a holdover company and we were drivers. We drove jeeps and trucks and buses. That actually was kind of fun. I drove everything from colonels in their jeeps to coal trucks and buses and driving troops back and forth to the firing range. So I did that for six weeks and then I went off to OCS.

LC: You know, it sounds, Bob, like you better not do any kind of little tiny infraction thing cause you’re going to get busted and bad things are going to happen—the snowball incident.

RK: Yeah, I know. Actually it was kind of comical. This California Highway patrolman, again he was a big man, and he had a white German shepherd on a leash.

LC: That’s freaky.

RK: He’s got his service revolver pulled. Now, we’re teenage kids throwing snowballs. Yeah.

RC: He, “All right you boys! Stand up and turn around!” He looks at the revolver in his hand and he focuses all attention on the revolver and he says, “I got this and I got this,” meaning the dog. “Now, if you run I can use that or I can use this.” Well, we’re standing. We’re not running. He puts us all in the back of the patrol car.

Meanwhile, Laura, meanwhile about a hundred-and-fifty kids up there, college kids from Grossmont and other community colleges in the area and all over the place, they start throwing snowballs at the cop car.

LC: Oh, gee.

RK: So he’s in the front seat.

LC: Making it worse.

RK: Oh, God. He’s in the front seat writing us a ticket. We’re all in the back seat scrunched in there elbow to elbow screaming, “Go catch them. Go catch them,” because we figure if he jumps out of the patrol car—

LC: We’re gone.

RK: We’re gone! But then we look down and we discover there’s no handles on the doors so we knew we were busted.
LC: Damn, they already thought of that! (Both laugh) Wow. But you didn’t
mind too much this six-week period where you—?

RK: Oh, no, that was quite enjoyable.

LC: It actually sounds like you might have learned a couple things, too. I’m sure
that you must have been quite observant at this point of, you know, watching protocol so
if a colonel comes along you kind of figure out how things change when that kind of
person is around.

RK: Yes, exactly. As a colonel’s driver, I had to be immaculate in my
appearance. I had to be correct in my military procedures and courtesy. Yes, I had a
sense that I was representing myself. So, yeah, I succeeded again as a colonel’s driver. I
was never tardy. I never did anything wrong in that sense at all.

LC: Again, someone in this situation, you’re waiting to go to OCS and you have
to do these sort of TDY (temporary duty) tasks that might not seem very meaningful but
it seems like you kind of made it into a package that was a positive thing rather than get a
ding or something.

RK: Yeah. Whether I was driving a five-ton dump truck full of coal to the
barracks in the winter or whether I was driving a deuce-and-a-half truck full of kids back
and forth to a firing range or whether I was driving a jeep for a colonel, I did the best I
could.

LC: You’re trying to do it well.

RK: Yeah.

LC: This is very interesting because it’s all showing a progression of becoming
kind of more integrated and more—I don’t know—more functional. You used the word
yourself that you excelled. When you got to Ft. Benning can you tell me a little bit about
the routine there?

RK: Of OCS?

LC: Yes. What would a day look like for you?

RK: Well, gosh—memory. Come on back, memory.

LC: How long did OCS last?

RK: Well, OCS was six months. It was a twenty-five week period. I was a
member of 95th Company, I believe it was. No, wait a minute, 97th OC Company, I think,
was my number. We started in November, I believe, of ’66 and graduated in May ’67. That might be six months. Again, I mean, I fell into the routine. The physical training was hard. The mental training was tough. Unbeknownst to me, Laura, at least at the time, I guess I just did have the academic—academic is not the right word to use. I was smart. I don’t know whether that’s the right word to use or not. I had never thought of myself as being intellectual but I must have had those skills because I didn’t have any difficulty with the mental aspect of OCS, the schooling, the exams that we had to take, the routine of being in a classroom was comfortable for me. The physical stuff was okay. It took some getting used to. Of course, you had to contend with the harassment from the TAC officers and the pressure that they would put on you to make or break some candidates. A typical day would begin early in the morning with physical training, breakfast, and then some type of training. A lunch, more training, a dinner, perhaps more training, maybe a little private time and then lights out and then getting ready for the next day.

LC: How did it break down between classroom work and, let’s say, practicums, outdoor stuff? Did you have more classroom stuff in the front end and more application at the back end or was it more even?

RK: I would have to say it was even. I know I’m straddling the fence with that, but I don’t have a good recollection. OCS is broken down as a sort of—there’s three phases. The first eight weeks you are a junior candidate. You have no status at all among the other candidates. First eight weeks the attrition rate is very, very high. The intent there is certainly to put a lot of physical pressure on the men, a lot of mental pressure on the men, find out who’s going to break, find out who’s not going to break. Weed out the weak hitters as quickly as possible. So there’s a lot of harassment. You get harassed by junior candidates. You get harassed by—I’m sorry, you’re a junior candidate. You get harassed by the intermediate candidates. You get harassed by the senior candidates. You get harassed by the TAC officers.

LC: The intent as you understand it, I don’t know if you appreciated this at the time, but it was to get the pile down to the ones who were probably going to succeed.

RK: Yeah, to separate the wheat from the chaff. Exactly. Now, to what degree that was a conscious thing as part of policy or procedure at Ft. Benning. I certainly can’t
comment on. But in any type, I mean, it’s the same as a football boot training camp. You
got to get rid of the guys that aren’t going to make the team.

LC: Right. Was any of that painful for you to observe when certain guys would
not make it when they would have to withdraw?
RK: No. Not really. I mean, I didn’t. I don’t know about the other men. I didn’t
develop a lot of friendships. You stayed pretty much to yourself. You mind your own
business. I can’t even remember the names of the two men I lived with for six months.

LC: Really?
RK: Three of us guys lived in the same room for six months. We hardly ever
touched the floor. We had spit shined floors. We moved on diapers and disposable rugs.
We had static displays that we hardly ever touched. We lived out of our footlockers. We
were intimate roommates, but I don’t even remember their names.

LC: That’s interesting.
RK: So, yeah. It was an odd situation. There were different levels of harassment
that they did. Some of it was mental, purely mental. I mean, they have what they called
Blue Mondays. On a Blue Monday an entire company of senior candidates from their
eighteenth to their twenty-fifth week they would descend upon your company barracks
and just harass the living crap out of you for a couple, three hours from 4:30 or 3:30 A.M.
in the morning until time for breakfast. You know, you just do pushups in the showers or
you did pushups under your bed or between the springs and the mattress of the bed.
They’d yell and they’d scream at you and you had to do all these things. It was just a
form of harassment. One thing that did happen during OCS—well, there are other forms
of harassment, too, that I don’t always have to go into, but one thing that I remember so
vividly, really sticks out in my memory, is that we had a Blue Monday. We were the first
OC Company to ever be allowed to leave Ft. Benning for Christmas leave. I couldn’t
afford to go home to California so I and—actually, it wasn’t one of my roommates, but I
and another friend went up to Ohio to visit his family and I spent Christmas there. We
came back from Christmas break on a Sunday, January second or third, and that Monday
we had a Blue Monday. After a couple hours of physical harassment we had to go out
and take the Army PT (physical training) test. So it was, you know, 5:30, five o’clock in
the morning and here we are in the frozen soil of Georgia taking this Army PT test and people are puking everywhere. It was terrible.

LC: What does the test consist of if you can just—?

RK: Oh, gosh! Running a mile, sit-ups, long jump—gosh, there were five aspects of it. It’s a long time ago, Laura.

LC: I know. I know.

RK: Our company did miserably, absolutely miserable. Well, the upshot of that was when the training was over for that day and we’re all just dog-assed dead tired, the TAC officers got the word from the company commander, and we had this new CO (commanding officer) that nobody had seen yet. It was maybe his first or second day as our company commander there at Ft. Benning of an OC Company. His name was Erickson; light red hair, soft-spoken Georgia boy. The company is gathered outside in the company area and he walks out of the first floor in the middle and stands above us on the top of the steps and we’re all gathered round. (growling, hoorah sounds) He was in his dress greens with all of his Vietnam medals on. I just about, my eyes just popped out. God, he looked good! Oh, God. He was everything I had dreamed of. A captain, Army, Vietnam veteran, company commander, and look at all those medals on his chest. Son-of-a-bitch! God! Wow! He said in his soft, like I said, he just said, “Gentlemen, I’ve just reviewed the results of your PT tests and I’m not pleased at all. Here’s my plan. Tonight after I’m finished you’re going to run a mile. Tomorrow night you’re going to run two miles, and every night after that you’re going to run until you get to eight miles and then you’re going to run eight miles of every night until the day you graduate.” Of course, we all went (groaning sounds), but his way of approaching it in such a calm manner. I mean, he didn’t yell and scream at us. He just told us he was disappointed and told us what his plan was and that’s it. We ran a mile that night and every night until we got to eight miles and then every night after that until—actually, he gave us a break towards the last couple weeks of the cycle. But when we took our final PT test as a company, the company average was about 493 out of a possible 500. He had gotten us into such physical condition, as a company we were invincible.

LC: That’s incredible.
RK: Yeah! I mean, of course, right after that then I go to jump school. Then I go
to Airborne school, Ft. Benning, right around the corner.
LC: Where you need to be, right.
RK: Who wants to be the stick leaders? Who can run? You know? Shit. Myself
and two other lieutenants, three other lieutenants, we took over as stick leaders. We ran
them kids in the ground. We had the TAC officers in jump school telling us to slow
down. We’re going to kill people ’cause we can run like gazelles. I mean, you want to
run three miles? Hell, let’s go and off we went.
LC: Do you remember this young company commander’s name?
RK: Erickson was his name. I don’t remember his first name.
LC: He sounds like he made a big impression.
RK: Yes, he did. Yeah. When he came out of those steps it was like—how can I
say it? I mean, it was just like watching a movie icon walk out of the mist onto the stage
of a—think of a rock concert, I mean.
LC: Did the other guys feel the same way? Do you know?
RK: I don’t know, but I know I did.
LC: Wow. That’s powerful.
RK: Yeah. As little as I knew of him, of course, by then I was still just a twenty-
year-old kid, almost to get to be twenty-one I suppose. I’d have followed him anywhere
just by the way he looked.
LC: That’s incredible. That’s incredible
RK: Yeah. I knew that’s what I wanted to do. That’s who I want to be. I want
to have medals like that.
LC: Once you came out of OCS and it sounds like you’re all tight and you’re
ready to take them on, how did it happen that you went to jump school? How did that get
arranged?
RK: Well, it was a natural progression. I had never given up on the hope of
becoming a Green Beret. My decision to go to OCS was a decision to become an officer,
then become Green Beret qualified.
LC: Right. Not one or the other.
RK: Not one or the other. No. I would be a Green Beret. That was it. I could be a Green Beret as an enlisted person, which I would have been perfectly happy with. I think I may have been satisfied with that emotionally, but that happenstance of my age was another door that opened in my life. Here’s a chance.

LC: Yeah. This is something that I’m sure a listener would pick up on. It looked like the door was slamming shut but in fact it was flying wide open for you to go to OCS.

RK: That’s right. Again, well, in OCS again I was like I said before I was chosen to be one of the guys that had the sabers and practiced with the sabers and lead the company in the eighteenth week review. I just did well. I seldom had any disciplinary problems. We all goofed off and did things we probably shouldn’t have done, but I just fell into that Army life, that structured, disciplined approach to life and to problem solving.

LC: Now did jump school come to you as a matter of course or did you have to put in for it or how did that unfold?

RK: Well, I put in for it because it was, as far as I was concerned it was all part of the package that I had envisioned for myself. To be a Green Beret you need to be Airborne qualified. So there was never any doubt in my mind that I would not become Airborne qualified. So officer training was first. Like I said it was a door that opened. I didn’t know how beneficial it would be to me at the time, so there I go.

LC: Was this at Ft. Benning, as well?

RK: This was at Ft. Benning. So the three weeks of Airborne training was very simple for me. Physically, mentally it was—just having come out of OCS it was like being on vacation in the Bahamas. Airborne school was a piece of cake.

LC: Were you guys still packing your own chutes at this point?

RK: Yes. Well, no. No. No. No. We did not. We did not pack our own chutes. We received training but we did not pack our own jump chutes.

LC: Okay. I think there had been a policy change around that. I’m not certain exactly when it took place so I was just wondering what side of the divide you were on.

RK: As we went through the line to get our parachutes for our jumps we had the right to say to the rigger, “You jump it.” So if a rigger handed us a parachute we could
hand it back to him and say, “You jump it,” and he would be forced to jump that chute. Although I said we did receive training on how to pack, them we weren’t responsible.

LC: You weren’t responsible for the—

RK: We didn’t do it. After that then I immediately went to Ft. Bragg, North Carolina, for my Green Beret training.

LC: At last.

RK: At last, as an officer.

LC: You were a second lieutenant, is that right?

RK: Yes. Yes.

LC: Okay. Tell me about arriving at Ft. Bragg. What do you remember about walking in there or arriving there at first?

RK: Oh, it was like a Muslim going to Mecca on the haj.

LC: Really? Wow.

RK: I was in heaven. I mean I was—Smoke Bomb Hill was—it was the epicenter of Green Beret. I mean to walk around that area and to see physically fit strapping men walking around wearing their green berets. It sounds kind of sexual, but it just gets you excited!

LC: It sounds like you were lit up and ready to go.

RK: Oh, I was. Yeah. I didn’t like still being a trainee. I didn’t like still being in school but I knew I had a little bit more to go. I knew there would be twelve weeks more of training to become a Green Beret qualified officer and I had endured my basic. I had endured the AIT. I’d endured OCS and jump school. I just had one more thing to endure and then I would be done as a trainee. I longed for a duty station, a real job.

LC: Yeah. Some application. Yeah.

RK: Yeah. I mean, visiting the JFK Center for Special Warfare is what they called it at that time. Learning the legends of John Kennedy and General Stillwell. Meeting people like Sgt. Maj. Fred Davis, who was sergeant major of the company that I was assigned to after I got out of training. Interacting with Green Berets. Oh, God. It was the best! It was the best. I’d made it. All I had to do was get through this training.

LC: How’d that go?

RK: Oh, it went fine.
LC: Were there parts of it—I mean, everyone will be clear that at this point you’re at the top of your game because of the physical preparation and all of the previous training and you’ve flown through it seems all of these earlier schools. Was there anything in the Green Beret training that particularly stands out either as especially challenging for you and it was something that you really needed to get hold of or something that was particularly difficult for others that you handled well? Can you point out one or two parts of the training that were of a special interest?

RK: The only thing that memory allows for right now is the fact that, as I look back on it, I didn’t do as well in Green Beret school as I had done in the other schools. I graduated in the middle of the class in terms of academic standing. I found myself—

LC: Oh, yeah.

RK: Now I’m in with a group of men who are not necessarily my equals. They may be superior to me in their skills.

LC: Yeah. This is the cream of the crop here.

RK: Yeah. This is the cream of crop. Now I’m in a school for the cream of the crop and I have to come to the realization that maybe my performance on tests and—so yeah. I mean, the academic rigors of Special Forces school as an officer were tougher than I thought. Now, at the same time, I’m starting to fall into some bad off-duty habits—a lot of drinking, a lot of carousing around. I’m single. I’m good looking. I’m a Green Beret. I’m chasing women every night and drinking far too much. So I’m probably not doing the best job that I could do as a student. Nonetheless, I still think I’m okay, but as I look back on it realizing that I didn’t graduate in the upper one-third of the class. I got through. I became qualified, but I could have done better if I’d have been a little bit more diligent. I kind of have that feeling. Now, the attrition rate was very low. Almost everyone who started finished. I think we only lost a small handful of men from that because by the time you get to that point you’re either committed to finishing it or you shouldn’t have started in the first place.

LC: The sorting has already begun.

RK: Yeah. The sorting has pretty much all gone out. Almost everybody who started finished but, as I said, in my case we didn’t finish with the expectations perhaps
that we had started with. Because we were an officer, or as officers going through it, the
training that we got was not as intense as the training that an enlisted person would
receive becoming a Green Beret. We had only twelve weeks to learn all that they
intended to teach us, light weapons, heavy weapons, communications, operations,
intelligence, medicine. You know, the Green Beret training for an enlisted man to
become a medic was nearly one year in length, including emergency hospital internships
toward the end and surgical techniques. Light weapons training, heavy weapons training,
were much longer periods of time for an enlisted man.

LC: Just to clarify, Bob, if I can, the assumption was that you would have picked
up parts of what you needed to know in your earlier education before you got there as an
officer. Is that right?

RK: Yes. Yeah. I think that would be a reasonable assumption for the
instructors at the Green Beret school to [make]. Their purpose was to teach us small-unit
tactics, leadership skills, operations intelligence because they presumed us to have
weapons training. Presumed us to have a certain level of medical training, but there was
no presumption that we had any operations and intelligence training—how to organize
and conduct a small-unit operation, which is what the Green Beret officer was intended to
do. So it was a lot of classroom work. It was very rigorous. There wasn’t a great deal of
physical work involved because we presumed to be physically fit by then and able to
withstand those rigors. But nonetheless, I did graduate and, boy, I was, like I said, by
August of ’67 when all that training was done and I went home on leave, bullets would
bounce right off my chest. I couldn’t be stopped. I was the cock of the walk. I went
walking around the shopping malls. (laughs)

LC: Where were your parents? We’ve talked a little bit about the contrast with
your brother, but where were they with you and with what you had decided to do and
followed through on doing?

RK: Well, we never talked a lot about that and that is one of the regrets that I
have in my life. My dad and I before he died never had a chance to really get down to
some good adult-style talking about this, but I believed them to be proud of their son. I
believed them to respect, perhaps, what I had done. I don’t think they ever understood
why I did what I did and that’s probably why I regret not having a chance to talk about it.
But I could see in their eyes the love they had for me, especially at the ceremony when Mom and Dad flew into Georgia and pinned the bars on me as a second lieutenant.

LC: That just must have been incredible.

RK: Yeah. That was very emotional, of course, for all of us. My father, of course, with his Navy background he knew the difference between enlisted and officer and I think when he saw me as an officer in the Army he saw a man rather than a kid who’d gotten thrown out of high school. That certainly made me feel better.

LC: Yes. It sounds like that’s part of what you were after.

RK: Yeah. Yeah.

LC: Did they give you any sense, either of them, of their either worry for you around Vietnam or their own views on the conflict?

RK: No.

LC: It didn’t come up?

RK: It didn’t come up. I don’t think it would have come up. My mother would have never said anything to me without my father’s approval. She probably would have never talked to Dad about it unless she had some idea that he would have said, “Yes, you can talk to Bobby about it.” The structure of the family, I think, precluded that. Dad had his own ideas and he wanted to keep to himself. No. We never talked about it. Never gave me a sense of the impending danger that I was about to get in. Again, like I said earlier, for me I was like the child that had joined the circus. I was having the time of my life, Laura.

LC: Yeah. You said you were the cock of the walk.

RK: Oh, yeah.

LC: I mean, were the women just, like, running at you because you had the uniform on and everything?

RK: God sakes, yes! Girlfriends from high school that I hadn’t seen and wouldn’t even give me the damn time of day, you know? They’re hanging all over me, not in a sexual way, but in an adoring sort of, “Look at you. Look at Bobby Kreger!”

LC: Wow. Can you believe? Look at—
RK: “Can you believe Bobby—did you see Bobby Kreger the other day? God, look at him! He’s a Green Beret!” Like I said I practically slept in that uniform, you know? Oh, I was so full of myself and proud. Yeah.
LC: Well, what a switch.
RK: Yeah.
LC: You know, I mean, in some ways the Army had given you already something that a lot of people never have in their entire lives as you know, Bob, that kind of self-confidence and kind of, “I’m here, deal with me,” kind of thing. Some people, of course, never get that. It’s very interesting that the Army through these different training packages and you’re having engaged so completely in them had instilled this in you. It’s actually quite a statement about the kind of training that is possible. Let me just ask quickly, did you have in hand orders for your first posting?
RK: Well, yes. I was assigned to Bravo Company of the 7th Special Forces Group at Ft. Bragg as the S-2 officer, the intelligence officer, for the company. So there that was my sort of training-wheels time as a brand new second lieutenant, Green Beret officer. I spent—oh, gosh, let’s see. That would have been late ’67, August, September perhaps, in ’67 to about June, July of ’68 in that capacity. That’s where I learned, I guess, a little more the nuances of being an Army officer, conduct on base in uniform, and conduct off base.
LC: Did that part of your life change?
RK: Oh, yes. Like I indicated, I mean, I was footloose and fancy free and I was getting involved in a lot of affairs with women, both single women and married women, women of—wives of soldiers who were in Vietnam. I don’t know. I guess I was kind of—boy, this is some soul-searching time, too, as well for me, but I was kind of going through perhaps some sort of sexual revolution. I mean, I was full of testosterone and willing to share it with anybody. I mean, the officer’s clubs, the NCO (non-commissioned officer) clubs were meat markets—drinking, carousing around at night. But during the day was when you were in uniform and you were learning how to be a lieutenant. You were learning how to interact with your senior NCOs and your master sergeant E-8s and E-9 first sergeants and learning how to interact with corporals—with
corporals—specialists, with the sergeant E-5s and E-6s. You were learning how to be respectful of a person’s position, learning how to be respectful of the service that they do.

LC: What about the position as S-2? What did that entail? What were you learning there?

RK: Well, I was just a figurehead. I mean, an S-2 officer at Ft. Bragg, intelligence officer, did very little really. You processed security clearances. A lot of people push it and that was okay. I mean, that was the job that I was assigned to to do until it was my time to go to Vietnam.

LC: Just as a matter of interest, what kinds of things would not go through on a clearance investigation? Not speaking of any specific individual, but if you had to do or process part of a background investigation for clearance what kinds of things would trip a wire?

RK: Felonies.

LC: That probably would do it.

RK: To be honest with you, I don’t recall that I ever had one that didn’t go through.

LC: Really?

RK: Again, I was just small change. From the time that a second lieutenant graduated out of the Special Forces school, until the time they went to Vietnam for the first trip, everyone pretty well understood that they were just marching. They were just—what am I trying to say?

LC: Marking time?

RK: Marking time. You know, they were just marching in place until something else happened to them. I can’t think that any of us ever got involved in anything really meaningful in that interim period. I reported to work. I saluted my NCOs. I sat down behind my desk. I did what they told me to do. Processing—I was not always privy to some of these security clearance requests, either. I mean, they were being processed by other people.

LC: Somewhere higher in the atmosphere.

RK: Yeah.

LC: Let me ask a timeline question, Bob.
RK: Sure.

LC: During the year that you spent at Bragg or nearly a year, of course, the Tet Offensive occurred and I wonder what reaction you had to it, how much attention did you pay and what you recall about it?

RK: Okay. I paid, again, very little attention to it. My orders for Vietnam came—I arrived in-country about a month after the Tet Offensive. No, no, no. I’m sorry. No, not a month. No. I arrived in June, July of ’68.

LC: After the Second Tet or whatever—May ’68—you were there right after that. Yeah.

RK: Yeah. So when the Tet Offensive—I can’t recall having discussions with other NCOs or officers about it. I guess it was just one of the things that happened. I don’t know. I don’t know how to respond to that particular question.

LC: Do you remember, for example, another event from that period, the early part of 1968, when Dr. Martin Luther King was shot? Do you recall that?

RK: Yes. Yeah.

LC: Did it have any ripples for you or for African-Americans who might have been on the base or around the base that you remember?

RK: Well, not that I remember. No. Again, I mean, I guess I was kind of settling into a life that had the comfort of my daytime military job and being in uniform and all that went with that and my nighttime, off-campus social life.

LC: You were busy with—

RK: I was busy. I was still young and full of piss and vinegar. I don’t remember that I was ever—you know, I didn’t spend time reading journals or newspapers. I didn’t spend a lot of time intellectualizing about the war. I just kind of went about my daily activities.

LC: Were you paying attention to the presidential election?

RK: No.

LC: Not at all?

RK: No. Not until later. (laughs)
LC: Yeah. Well, I can imagine the ’68 election, well, the ’70 election was probably—sorry, ’72—is probably interesting to you. Did you have any kind of political preference?

RK: I’d never voted.

LC: Really?

RK: I never voted. I didn’t vote until I came out of the Army. I didn’t vote until I began to mature as a thinker and evolve as a different type of man. Again, see, those six years that I was in the Army on active duty were those formative years from age nineteen to twenty-five and I never voted. I was surrounded in this cocoon of the military. Didn’t have to pay taxes. Gosh, I didn’t even have to renew my driver’s license. I mean the Army was caring for me in such a way that all other concerns never seemed to enter in.

LC: Interesting.

RK: Yeah.

LC: Wow. Let’s take a break there, Bob.

RK: Sure.
Interview with Robert Kreger
Date: November 11, 2005

Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Dr. Robert Kreger. Today is the eleventh of November 2005, and appropriately enough Veteran’s Day. I am on the campus of Texas Tech in Lubbock, Texas, and Bob is speaking by telephone from California. First of all, Bob, thanks again for your time today and Happy Veteran’s Day.

Robert Kreger: Thank you very much, Laura, and again it is a pleasure to participate in this program.

LC: Well, it’s an honor to have you be willing to participate and to share with us the things that you have already and I know will continue to do. Bob, let me bring you to the point at which we had wrapped up the last session and that had, as point of departure I suppose, your assignment to Vietnam in the spring of 1968. Can you tell me about receiving your orders?

RK: Wow. Well, not a great deal to say there. I mean, most of us expected to receive orders. It didn’t come as a shock to me. I don’t recall having any strong emotions one way or the other. As I said, it was kind of a sort of a fait accompli that you were going to be going. So I received orders and then prior to departure I took a thirty-day leave and visited my parents and with my family in California and then off I went.

LC: What was, if you will, the feeling in your part of California, in your neck of the woods, at this time? Was there any political feeling about the war that you could see on a public level?

RK: No. At home on leave, which would have been May, I suppose, of ’68, stayed pretty much close to home. Contacted old friends from high school and college and just, you know, partied and enjoyed that time. As I said in the first interview that we had, I had never been a very politically savvy sort of young man so I wasn’t aware of any overt large Lemon Grove California public demonstrations. I did wear my uniform proudly and never had any difficulty there. I guess the short answer would be no. I mean, it seemed benign at best. I didn’t visit any college campuses. I didn’t go searching.
for any show of anti-war movement or pro-war movement at all. I just kind of was a
soldier on leave getting ready to go overseas.

LC: Actually, it’s very interesting because it’s a corrective in some way to the
general impression that by the summer of 1968 California was on fire.

RK: It probably certainly was on fire at major universities, especially Berkeley,
of course, but southern San Diego, I mean southern California—San Diego, in that area—
has always been pretty laid back politically. I can’t remember that San Diego State
University, the home of the Aztecs, as a real political hotbed back then. Now, it may
have been but it certainly wasn’t—I wasn’t aware of it.

LC: How was it departing for Vietnam? What was your route and were there
shows of emotion or just kind of generally good on you and get on with it?

RK: Pretty much the latter. My first wife, Barbara, of course, was pregnant with
my son Gregory and so she was kind of preoccupied with the pregnancy. We had only
been married, gosh, we hadn’t even been married four months, three months at the time,
so we were just kind of getting used to one another, as well. My mother and father were
very gracious. My brother—let’s see, ’68, my brother was—he was off at college. I
don’t recall that my brother and I had a lot of contact before I left for Vietnam the first
trip, but everybody in the community was, you know—what’s the expression—hail
fellow, well met or something like that. Off you go. You know, God speed. Do a good
job. Keep your head low sort of thing. So that was it. Gosh, I guess I departed LAX
(Los Angeles International Airport) for San Francisco—I’m trying to remember, my
goodness. San Francisco and then San Francisco would have been Travis Air Force
Base, I believe. Then north to Anchorage and we took the global route and making the
way back down from north to south along the east coast of Asia. I do remember now that
I’m a professional geographer—I wasn’t aware of it at the time, but I couldn’t figure out
why the hell we landed in Anchorage, Alaska, to go to Vietnam. Now I understand. Of
course, the global route and fueling requirements and things. But I remember being
dressed in my Class B uniform, the khakis, the traveling khakis. I remember being on a
crowded airplane with a lot of young men, officers, privates, non-commissioned officers,
everybody sitting on the airplane and biding their time. In those days you could smoke
on the aircraft and eating their meals. Just kind of acting as sort of anxious travelers,
perhaps, would be the best way to describe it. There seemed to be a palpable sort of feeling in the air of something impending, but as I remember it was difficult to actually describe, but you could sense that we all knew that we were on our way to something, especially the ones—and this will come later in my interviews—but especially the ones who were traveling back to Vietnam for the second time.

LC: Could you pick those guys out?
RK: I couldn’t then. If it were to be reenacted I probably could knowing how I felt going back the second time, but the first trip, again like I said before, I was just like the character Chris in the movie *Platoon*. I was just off on a quest. I was just soaking everything in like a sponge. I remember progressively, one thing that was comical to me. As we landed at each stop for change of crew or refueling, the flight crew, stewardesses, got uglier and uglier as we got closer and closer to Vietnam. Then finally they were all male.

LC: Really?
RK: Yeah! I don’t know whether—I think it was Pan American. I don’t know. I don’t know whether it was intentional for weaning us away from American round-eyed women or not.

LC: This was not a good flight. You got a bad flight.
RK: Yeah. Of course, coming back was better, though, because when you left Vietnam they progressively got prettier and prettier. You stopped having male stewards and then you got female stewardesses and then finally your last leg of the journey they all had shorter skirts and longer legs, but going over there I remember, God, the gals just keep looking worse and worse.

LC: That’s really frightening.
RK: What the heck’s going on here?
LC: Well, I’ll tell you, I have interviewed some gals who did fly in and out of Tan Son Nhut on commercial carriers as the stewardesses and the ones I’ve spoken to for the Oral History Project, boy, they love those guys.
RK: Oh yeah. They really did take care of us. They did.
LC: They were very full of emotion and concern for the men.
RK: Oh, yeah. I remember coming back the first time, too. I’m getting ahead of myself. I mean I could tell that story now but—

LC: Whatever you like, or you can foreshadow it for us.

RK: Oh, that’s fine. When I did return from my first trip to Vietnam and I arrived at, I guess it would have been Seattle Tacoma. We landed at SEA-TAC and I still hadn’t had time to—I don’t know what had happened. I can’t recall exactly what happened but I remember still being dressed in fatigues when I shouldn’t have been dressed in fatigues. I rushed to the ticket counter and said to the stewardess or said to the counter agent, “Give me a first class seat on the first thing smoking to San Diego, California.” She looked at me with this wonderful smile and she said, “You must be just back,” and I said, “Yes ma’am.” So she punched out my first class ticket and I went into the bar and somebody bought me a couple of drinks. I boarded the airplane and the stewardess came over to me and she saw that I was sitting down in first class. She said, “Well—and, of course, by then I was a first lieutenant and so forth. She said to me, “You must be just back again.” I said, “Yes ma’am”. She says, “I think we can get you drunk before you hit San Diego.” I said, “That’s a good idea!”

LC: Good for her. Good for her.

RK: By the time I got off the plane in San Diego I could barely walk.

LC: That was handled.

RK: (Laughs) She took wonderful care of me.

LC: Good for her. That’s nice. Your trip over—you were describing the route and I think it’s interesting as a geographer I’m sure you still find it interesting. You were going via Anchorage and then would you have stopped in Japan or Okinawa?

RK: Boy, let me see if I can remember. I don’t recall, but it had to be one of the two. It had to be one of the two, but right now, Laura, I simply can’t remember.

LC: That’s okay. Do you recall the mood as you were coming into Vietnam?

RK: Yes, I do very vividly. As we approached I remember very clearly that the captain of the aircraft came on the speaker system and he said to us, “Gentlemen, we have just crossed into the airspace of the Republic of Vietnam.” I fully expected to get shot out of the sky. I expected to look out the window of the aircraft and see, you know, communist jets flying at the aircraft and shooting at us, but we had a normal landing.
Landed and got off the airplane just like you would get off the airplane at any other American international airport, but yeah, it was a pretty—there weren’t any shouts on board. It was pretty solemn at that time when he said, “Gentlemen, we’ve just crossed into the airspace of Republic of Vietnam.” Then, of course, we just started our descent and we landed at Tan Son Nhut.

LC: What was it like, do you remember, Bob, as they opened the door?
RK: Hot and humid. Busy. Air Force and Army people everywhere doing all manner of different types of things. A lot of logistics activity going on. I remember of course being harassed by the old vets who were heading out. Here come the newbies. Here come the green ones. You could tell by the color of our uniforms that we hadn’t been in the sun very long. So we got jostled around a little bit by the old guys and, of course, at the time it was a little upsetting but as time went by you certainly understood why they were doing it.

LC: You said it was a little upsetting at the time. I mean, did it shake you a little?
RK: Huh?
LC: Did it shake you?
RK: No. It just seemed—I don’t know. I guess I’ve had an awful long time to think about it, of course, but it just seemed, I don’t know, maybe unfair would be the best word or perhaps unkind. I mean, I kind of got a sense that “Gee I’m here because I’m in the Army and I’m an officer and I’m doing my duty and you guys don’t have to poke fun at me. Why are you poking fun at me because my uniform’s not as gray or bleached out as yours is?” So, I mean it wasn’t a terribly emotional sort of setback. It just took me aback a little bit to think that we would be the objects of that kind of attention.

LC: Yeah. It’s interesting.
RK: Rather than saying, “Hello! Welcome! Glad you’re here! I’m glad you’re taking my place! I’m going home!”

LC: Be safe.
RK: Yeah. Be safe. You know? Keep in touch with your families. Write letters. They could have said those words, but you have to understand the context. I mean, going home was such a powerful emotional thing and it would be very appropriate to express that passion for going home in that kind of way. It was just a little bit strange
for that to happen, but I don’t think any of the men who were joking with us were evil
minded, doing it to hurt us in any way. No. I think it was just an expression of, however
misguided, but just an expression of their emotions to be on the way out seeing the
younger ones on the way in.

LC: You have no idea what you’re about to—there probably was some of that,
too.

RK: Yeah, yeah.

LC: Your arrival, let me just ask a little about that. Were you traveling by
yourself or were there others?

RK: No, I was traveling by myself.

LC: Okay. How did you make your connection to wherever you were supposed
to go next?

RK: Gosh. That’s an interesting question. As I recall, my assignment was to
Nha Trang to the headquarters of the 5th Special Forces Group. So I can only assume that
there would have been liaison officers in the airport area who were looking out for
incoming personnel who would have been assigned to their units. I mean, I don’t have a
clear memory of that but—

LC: Do you have a sense of how long it took you to get to Nha Trang?

RK: Oh, no it wasn’t a very long time at all. Just a day or two, perhaps, at Tan
Son Nhut—maybe not even that long. Then the next stop was Nha Trang.

LC: What did the airfield there look like? Do you remember coming in there?

RK: No, I don’t. I don’t have a—boy. Well, it certainly wasn’t as large and
perhaps as busy as that of Tan Son Nhut. Gosh. No. I just, suddenly I was there. I think
we flew a C-130. It may have been a -123. I’m not even sure how we got there.

LC: This was just kind of being unwrapped for you and you were sort of going
along with whatever the game was. I’m sure that’s right.

RK: Yeah. Yeah. I was just being told what to do and doing what I was told to
do by others who clearly to me knew what plane I was supposed to get on and what time
I was supposed to be at what place. I was just kind of doing what I was told. Yeah.
LC: Now, you were looking for the headquarters of the 5th SF (Special Forces) Group. Did you actually find and go to the headquarters or what was next? What happened next?

RK: Well, what happened next was—yes. All incoming Special Forces soldiers went to Nha Trang to the headquarters. From there they would then in-process through that headquarters, more paperwork, perhaps change of orders, perhaps not a change of orders, and further reassignment to smaller units whether you were going to go to a C Team or a B Team or an A Team or whether you were going to be a payroll clerk who worked in Nha Trang or whatever your job was going to be. Officers were assigned to a training cadre that operated what was called the COC, or the Combat Orientation Course, and that was part of the in-processing that all young lieutenants received as they came through Nha Trang. I suppose it was commanded by an officer, but the cadre were all NCOs, senior NCOs, who—it was a week-long course where we received further Special Forces-style training. A lot of paperwork, a lot of classroom activity just acclimating us during that week not only to the weather, to the country, but to—how can I say it—to the expectations that were being placed upon us. This is gonna be your role. This is gonna be your job. This is how you should go about doing your job sort of thing. You’re destined to be an A Team executive officer so here’s going to be some of the things you need to do and so on and so forth. It was basically an academic setting. I don’t recall that there was a lot of physical training because the assumption was that by the time you got there you were physically fit and ready for that type of rigorous activity. Now, at the conclusion of the COC, there was an all-night live ambush. That was the graduation ceremony. I did lose one of my Ft. Bragg fellow lieutenant classmates as a result of that.

LC: You did mention that in the notes that you provided. Bob, I wonder what you can tell us about not only that incident but also the exercise as a whole. What was the design?

RK: Well, the exercise as a whole was—well, I don’t know. I don’t want to speak ill unnecessarily, but my impression was that this was just sort of a practice run where as a culmination of the COC the NCOs would take you out on an all-night night ambush, and presumably into an area near Nha Trang. It wasn’t a long walking distance at all. I don’t remember that we had to walk long at all. The notion was it was to further
instill—at least my notion of it was—it was to further instill in us how to conduct a night ambush stealthfully, quietly, laying down along a trail, being quiet all night long, and being alert and awake all night long, a test of the physical endurance, a test of your mental preparedness. The thought that I had was that we could not expect any enemy activity. Now, I don’t know the history of the COC, Laura. I don’t know for how long this night ambush had been a part of their curriculum, but to my remembrance no one had ever been wounded and/or killed at all on this exercise. So my presumption was that the school selected locations presumably safe that they could just take the lieutenants out, lay the lieutenants down by a rice paddy dike, and see if they could stay awake all night. Of course, we were—Merril, my friend Merril Reich, Lieutenant Reich, was killed on the COC. I believe he had only been in-country three weeks. I believe he was shot two weeks before I arrived or three weeks before I arrived ’cause I know he preceded me. His orders came quicker and he preceded me to Vietnam somewhat. I can’t recall the exact time frame that we were different, but I do know that his death shook up the COC operations and that I don’t know what changes they had made to further ensure the safety of the lieutenants while they were out on this all-night ambush, but ours was completely uneventful. I mean, we just laid there all night and just tried to stay awake, but on this particular occasion, sadly, apparently the site they selected, whether it was one they had used before I do not know, but the site that they selected a small enemy patrol came down apparently, as I remember being told about the incident. A small enemy patrol came walking down the rice paddy dike and the young green lieutenants prematurely engaged the enemy when it wasn’t into the killing zone of the ambush and the enemy was able to fire back. From what I understand Merril Reich took an AK round in the mouth and it came out his ass. That was it.

LC: Was that essentially how you were told that it happened?
RK: Yes. Yeah.
LC: Would the person or briefer or whoever, NCO telling the story, did he tell it to everyone at the same time?
RK: Yeah. Basically. Yeah. Basically we were told as we prepared for the ambush of what had happened on the previous ambush and—well, not the previous, an earlier one. That this was the story of how it happened and a lieutenant was killed. The
briefer—I can’t remember who it was now, Laura. He would not have known that I was a classmate.

LC: Right. That’s what I was getting to. Yeah.

RK: Yeah. He would not have known that I was a classmate of Merril Reich and when he said the name I just—it just hit me like a four-by-four. It was my first encounter with death in Vietnam.

LC: Well, it’s pretty sad.

RK: From a distance. I mean, sort of from a distance. I mean, I never saw his body. I never heard the gunshots. I had not yet been in combat. I had not yet had to kill or been shot at, but still it really brought it home. I shouldn’t say that. It began to really bring it home that this was serious business that one of my classmates had already been killed and that I would no longer see him. So yeah, that was the beginning perhaps of the maturing process that I went through.

LC: Well, that’s certainly the kind of thing that would make it start to get real.

RK: It was pretty sobering. However, at the same time you had to focus on yourself and get yourself ready to go for your next assignment. I knew I was going down to an A team. I just hunkered down and got to the business of getting ready to go.

LC: Just before we leave Lieutenant Reich and just so that we can get this correctly entered into the record, would you mind giving the spelling of his last name if you know it? Is it R-Y-K-E?

RK: No, no. It’s R-E-I-C-H. His first name is Merrill, M-E-R—I think it’s double R. M-E-R-R-I-L. His middle initial is D, delta. I’ve been blessed twice to be able to visit the Vietnam Wall and to inscribe his name. So yeah. It’s R-E-I-C-H. I’m pretty sure of that.

LC: Thanks Bob. It’s important that if we can, especially on today, the anniversary, remember these men and make sure that their service is recorded. He was there to serve just as you were. Your assignment was to an A team, and if you wouldn’t mind, Bob, for someone who doesn’t understand the distinctions within the Special Forces set up at the time you were there amongst the different teams, can you just scope out a little bit what the A team was, what it’s composition was?
RK: Okay. Well, an A team was the lowest level within the Special Forces in what they call the TO&E or Table of Organization and Equipment breakdown. You had your group headquarters and underneath the group headquarters were C detachments. Then underneath the C detachments were the B detachments. Then ultimately the A detachments. A detachments consisted of—well, the TO&E said that you could have three officers. You had a captain as a commander, first lieutenant as an executive officer, and also another first lieutenant as a psychological warfare operations officer. Underneath those would be ten enlisted men ranging in rank from E-9 or E-8, master sergeant or first sergeant, all the way down to usually maybe E-4 or E-5. The enlisted men were radio-telephone operators, heavy and light weapons specialists, operations and intelligence specialists, communications specialists—I think I said that already.

LC: That’s all right.

RK: Medical people. They were always cross-trained so that one enlisted man would have a primary specialty and then he could also serve in a second specialty. Often times the specialty would be light and heavy weapons, or medicine and commo, or commo and intelligence, and a variety of different types of combinations depending upon their training. So, the A teams had that, I guess they had the potential then for as many as thirteen, perhaps fourteen, men. Typically they never had a full complement of officers and NCOs, and typically the A team would have, I don’t know, maybe nine to twelve officers and NCOs, maybe sometimes more. The Special Forces A teams, the primary mission was interdiction along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. We were to the far west of South Vietnam up against the Cambodia-Laotian border as it stretched north-south along the western sides of South Vietnam, sometimes close to the border area, sometimes not too close, measured in thousands of kilometers. My A camp was about three thousand kilometers from the border. No, I’m sorry—three thousand meters, three kilometers.

Three thousand kilometers. That’s a long way.

LC: Yeah. You could have gotten home almost.

RK: Yeah. I’m sorry.

LC: That’s all right. You’re good. So about three thousand meters?

RK: Yeah. About three thousand meters. Each A team would have attached to it a CIDG (Civilian Irregular Defense Group) Montagnard fighting force. The CIDG stood
for Civilian—oh, God—Civilian Indigenous Defense Group or something like that. I can’t recall. Now these Montagnard soldiers were typically in the very, very early years, beginning in 1957, ’58, they would have been recruited out of the mountains by the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) and other United States agencies to become the fighting force for counter intelligence or counter insurgency force. So their loyalty to America was pretty well established by the time that they got into an A camp situation. I’m kind of getting off the subject here.

LC: That’s okay. You’re scoping this out really nicely.

RK: Each A team then had a certain area of responsibility that it was assigned to and conducted operations in and around that area. Of course, you had logistics involved, you had all your communications involved and a variety of different things going on. The typical operation would be two Special Forces personnel and one company of Montagnards. A company of Montagnards would consist of about eighty. In our particular A camp our fighting force numbered about four hundred people along with their wives and families and grandmas and grandpas and babies. We had about fifteen hundred people living at the A camp. Then two Special Forces soldiers would take a company of Montagnards out and you would leave the A camp and operate in the area for fourteen to sixteen days or so and then return back to the camp and wait your turn to go out—wait your turn in the rotation to go out again on a second operation. Gosh. I guess that’s about—I mean the primary mission once again as I said of the A team was to conduct these interdiction operations along the Ho Chi Minh Trail and to, well, interdict the enemy as it traveled up and down the Ho Chi Minh Trail and to go out and engage the enemy and get rid of them.

LC: Do you think, Bob, of this organization that you’ve outlined and I’m asking you this as kind of a retrospective question rather than your impressions on the ground at the time, but do you see this as part of the kind of search and destroy, search and locate, search and communicate operations that we associate, I think, with the Westmoreland period?

RK: No, no. I don’t. I don’t see a strategic connection between the two. The search-and-destroy types of operations were, that phrase is typically given to larger American-only unit operations, company level operations or larger—
LC: Main force units.
RK: Main force units. Yeah.
LC: The Special Forces units that we’re talking about that had Montagnard companies associated with them were essentially smaller-level operations?
RK: Yes. Yes.
LC: Not designed necessarily to pick a fight with the NVA (North Vietnamese Army)?
RK: Correct. Not designed necessarily to go out and find large NVA units.
Now, however, there were times when we would become under the operational control of larger units. I did get involved in one of those during my time there at the A camp, but typically no. I mean, our job, well, in the role of counter insurgency and in the genre of John Kennedy’s vision of the Green Beret and the strategy of it, was to train an indigenous force to be self-sufficient and to operate their own combat operations against the enemy. Now, sadly as it would have it, in my view that never really happened because on the ground in the field, at least in my case and maybe I’m being—I don’t know, maybe I shouldn’t go too far in this direction—but in my case at my A camp my LLDB (Luc Luong Dac Biet) counterparts, the Vietnamese Special Forces soldiers, were not good soldiers. I can’t remember that any of them ever accompanied a Montagnard company to the field. Now, I don’t know the level of fear that they may have experienced or the level of corruption that they were involved in. Our Vietnamese camp commander—see, they were the ultimate commanders, at least on paper, but I can’t recall that any of them ever actively got involved in any combat except for the time that we were attacked, and that’s another big story.
LC: Right which I’ll ask you about here as we go along, but essentially they weren’t going out on patrols?
RK: No. The job of conducting combat operations, the job of guiding, instructing, helping the Montagnards, fell to the Americans. Now, I suppose it was supposed to be that way but in between the Montagnards and the Americans should have been, at least in my view retrospectively, should have been the Vietnamese Special Forces soldiers who came to the field with us, who participated in the training of the Montagnards. To my experience at least at my camp they never did.
LC: Were they around at all when you first—?
RK: Oh, they were around. They were just partying in the A team area and taking their helicopter rides here and there. They were around the camp, but they were always either drunk on rice wine or involved in some other activity that certainly wasn’t at least germane to the conduct of interdicting operations at that time, at least in my view now all these years later.

LC: Right. Did you pick up on hostilities or upset between the Montagnards and the Vietnamese Special Forces?
RK: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Yeah. Very, very clearly. Yeah. Indeed, from the Montagnard fighting force we chose a group of young men who were particularly dedicated to the Americans. Now, were they particularly anti-Vietnamese officers? I can’t say for sure, but they probably were, but they were particularly dedicated to the Americans and we chose them to be sort of like our personal bodyguards. Whenever we went into the field two of them would accompany us and they’d help make our little hooch area at night and maybe help prepare the meal at night for us. It was kind of like having a combat valet. They were terribly loyal young men. I remember that one of my boys—Tui was his name, T-U-I—he turned out to be a high ranking officer in the FULRO (United Front for the Liberation of Oppressed Races) Movement.

LC: In the FULRO Movement?
RK: Yeah. I did not know that at the time until a bit later when I got to do a little investigating because, yeah, you could clearly see that the Montagnards—again at my particular camp—the Montagnards were not enamored at all of the Vietnamese.

LC: Right. As you point out, whatever the organizational table says things work out differently sometimes in real life. Well, let me ask about A camp and how it was set up. You’ve said that not only were the Montagnard company members there but also their families would follow them and essentially probably a range of sort of semi-village set up or something that was near the camp. Is that accurate? How was it laid out?
RK: Well, it was laid out like—our airstrip was a dirt airstrip on the north side of the camp. We were laid out in a rectangle. The shape of our camp was a rectangle. The long axis were running east-west. The short axis were north-south. I can’t recall exactly how large it might have been. A couple, three football fields, at the most on the north
side and maybe one or so football fields going north-south. To the north side along the
long axis was our dirt runway. We could land a C-123. If it had JATO (jet-assisted take-off) it could take off and land there on the strip, but if it didn’t have all it couldn’t stop.

LC: Now JATO is, for those who don’t know—

RK: JATO was some sort of jet propulsion assist mechanism that allowed the
prop engines on a C-123 some added propulsion so that they could take off and land in a
much shorter distance. So if the aircraft was equipped with that then it could land. Now, from the north side of the camp where the A strip was located, coming back to the south
was a short narrow dirt road that led to the entrance to the A camp. The A camp was
divided. The west side of the camp contained the Vietnamese Special Forces compound.
Then there was a small road that separated that from the east side of the compound,
which was much larger which [was] the American Special Forces compound. The
American Special Forces compound consisted of a team house, which was above ground.
We had a latrine above ground. We had supply warehouses, small supply warehouses,
above ground. Our sleeping quarters were all underground in tunnels built under the
compound. That was a wonderful year living in a tunnel. Now, all of that would have
been surrounded by earthen houses dug into the earth where the Montagnards lived. So in a rectangle surrounding both the Vietnamese and the American compounds lived the
Montagnards and their families in, again like I said, earthen houses that you walked down
into the earth. Carved out of the earth were these little small areas. I mean, I’m sitting
now in my office here at the house and, you know, probably eight-by-ten at the most or
eight-by-eight. Then each family unit would share these things. I’m sorry. Each family unit would have one and then they would be just side by side-by-side-by-side
surrounding us. They lived under ground. On top would be sandbags, some sheet metal
protecting them from artillery fire and mortar fire and things like that. All of that was
surrounded by concertina barbed wire in a variety of different configurations and two or
three different strands and layers of barbed wire. In the center of the compound was an
observation tower. Gosh. To the east I think—well, no, no. I believe it was to the west
was the Dak Poko River. To our west also was Highway 14 as it stretched north from
Kontum up to, golly—the north, the camp toward north. God, I can’t remember. I
should remember that. Ben Het I think was the name of the camp to our north.

Somewhere up there.

LC: I’m looking. Let me give you a name and ask you if it rings a bell at all.

Dak Kor was essentially on RC-14 near the Poko River. Dak Jak, Dak Sut—

RK: Dak Sut was to our north. Yes.

LC: Was to the north of you. Okay. There was a bigger I should say airstrip there.

RK: Dak Sut—in fact, by the time I came in-country in ’68 Dak Sut had been abandoned. Yes.

LC: Okay. Well, that gives us a sense of where you were.

RK: In fact, that was my first combat operation was to go up and reconnoiter around Dak Sut ’cause it had been reported to be some enemy activity up there.

LC: Let me ask you about that in a minute, if you’re willing to. This description of the camp and the layout is extremely useful. I think it sort of fleshes out kind of where you were living. You mentioned that there might be sandbags and sheeting on top of some of the earthen dugouts that the Montagnard families would be living in. What would be on top of the tunnels where the U.S. Special Forces were sleeping and where your quarters essentially were?

RK: Other than a wood frame building perhaps—now, there were steps leading down into the tunnel areas of our living quarters.

LC: How far down?

RK: Well, I’m trying to visualize. Perhaps a distance of eight to ten feet. Maybe twelve or thirteen steps, wooden steps that led down. So perhaps we were as much as, I don’t know, five, six feet underground because by the time you got down and then you dug back up, if you can visualize what I’m talking about.

LC: Sure. You have to stand up here.

RK: Yeah. You have to stand up. Now, on top of that there might have been a latrine. There might have been another structure, but other than that and the sandbags and other types of protective things on top of those structures there was nothing.

LC: Would the tunnel complex and the sleeping complexes be reinforced inside with some kind of material either wood or something else?
RK: Yes, we had wood beams much like in the olden days of mining and mine shafts. There was that type of reinforcement and they were made as livable as they could be made.

LC: How would you do that? I’d be fascinated to know because it sounds pretty rugged.

RK: Yeah, it was pretty rugged. I mean, I spent eight months, nine months or so, living in the room not much larger than six or seven feet wide, seven feet tall maybe—sharing it with another officer, actually sharing it with the psychological warfare operations officer that we had.

LC: Who would have been your same rank? Is that right?

RK: Yes, first lieutenant.

LC: First lieutenant. Uh-huh.

RK: Wash basin, wooden crates for chest of drawers, maybe some primitive type of—what am I trying to say—furniture that would have been made in Vietnam or purchased in Vietnam from a city nearby and flown up on helicopter. A cot, sheets, pillows, blankets, poncho liners for covers. We had electricity and sometimes you had a lamp. Sometimes it was just an exposed light bulb.

LC: Was this running by a generator or something?

RK: Yes. This was all run by generators. Yeah. It was pretty Spartan. It wasn’t—we would put pictures up on the walls. I mean, they were earthen walls, but sometimes the earthen walls would have been covered with a type of paneling. We had people in the camp, the Montagnards who had carpentry skills and they could panel the interior. One of the most indispensable things you had to have was a dehumidifier to get the humidity out.

LC: I was going to ask. It must have been pretty clammy down there.

RK: It was. It was. If the dehumidifier was broken, boy, you got it fixed real quick or you bought another one. You got on a helicopter and you went down to Kontum and got to the PX and bought another one as rapidly as you could. All in all, it didn’t feel claustrophobic. It became your home for the time you were there so you made the best you could of it. I mean, it wasn’t as if you were living under the most primitive of circumstances because you made improvements as you could. You made places to hang
pictures of your family. You made places to hang your clothes or your equipment and
places to put your shoes and things like that.

LC: So it was close but you could do what you could at the margins to make it—
RK: Yeah. Not only could you do it, but you just did it because you had a sense
of making it your own, of this being your refuge at night, a place for you to sleep in
relative safety. Yes.

LC: If I can ask a little bit about your Montagnards. You’ve mentioned Tui, and
I wonder how you were accepted when you first arrived. Were you a curiosity item or
had the relationships between Americans and Montagnards in this area gone well beyond
that now and they understood that you were the new officer coming in?

RK: It was the latter, yeah. The relationship between the United States soldiers
and the Montagnards had solidified and progressed to a point of respect and—I don’t
know, admiration might not be the right word, but the acknowledgement that this was the
new officer and he would do much the same as the other officer did who just left to go
home or who was just killed or whatever the case might have been. Yeah. I don’t
remember that we were viewed as objects of curiosity, no. Of course, each of us had a
different personality so the Montagnards had to get accustomed to that and we did things
and reacted in that way, but there was a honeymoon period. Then after the honeymoon
period you just got down to business and did what you had to do.

LC: What about communications? Can you talk a little bit about how well you
were able to communicate with them?

RK: Well, not very well. The John F. Kennedy Center for Military—they taught
us—well, for those—let me put it this way. For those Special Forces soldiers who went
to language training school obviously their communication skills would have been much
improved. Now, I never went. I don’t think I even had the chance to go, perhaps. So it
was difficult. If we didn’t speak they taught us—I’m babbling on here.

LC: You’re doing great. Don’t worry about it.

RK: They taught us the rudiments of Vietnamese before we left and when you
got there, of course, you came to realize that the type of Vietnamese that we had been
taught at Ft. Bragg in a very, very superficial way was almost useless. So from American
to Montagnard we would be interpreted either through a Montagnard soldier who
understood English well or a Vietnamese soldier who understood English and Montagnard. Retrospectively, I wish they had taught us French. If the Americans had taught us the Southeast Asian lingua franca of French we probably would have been able to communicate more effectively with the Montagnards. Certainly the older Montagnards who continued to speak French and maybe some of the Vietnamese officers who spoke French, but we quickly had to learn the numbering system. So you quickly learned to count so you could tell charges on mortars or you can count distances of the travel that you’ve been. You quickly learned a lot of the bad phrases, of course, and the sexually-oriented phrases. You quickly learned those. I never had a sense, Laura, that my instructions to Montagnards were being diluted in any way by any interpreter. I’m pretty confident that they did the job that was expected of them, yeah.

LC: Well, maybe as we talk about the year that you spent or at least a good eight months that you spent in this area we’ll come across instances where communications became, and problems that lay therein, became more important. Essentially it sounds, Bob, like you moved into a situation that was pretty well established and that you felt some trust in this. Did you feel safe there when you first arrived?

RK: Yes. Yeah. I did.

LC: Okay. Well, let me know if you can something about your bunkmate, the other first lieutenant who was there.

RK: Well, Joel Sapp was certainly my soul mate. At [this] time he’s probably one of the individuals that I’d certainly like to reunite with and have a few beers and talk about old times.

LC: Had he been there before you arrived?

RK: No. No. In fact he came—I think he came after I arrived. I can’t remember it all. Sometimes things get a little fuzzy.

LC: That happens to everybody including me. I’m a little fuzzy about last weekend.

RK: Yeah. To be honest with you I’m not so sure that Joel and I shared that underground compartment for the entire time. People came and went as they DEROS’ed (Date Eligible for Return from Overseas) back and forth to the United States or as they
were reassigned. But, nonetheless he was a wonderful young man. We were about the same age. He was tall. He was, oh gosh, 6’2” maybe, maybe 6’2”.

LC: Where is he from?
RK: I don’t remember. I don’t know.
LC: His last name was Sapp, S-A—?
RK: Sapp. S-A-P-P. Joel Sapp was his name. I remember that he was a very likeable kid. We loved to drink together. God, we would get so soused together, the two of us.

LC: What was the poison of choice?
RK: Oh, gosh!
LC: Whatever you could get?
 RK: Whatever we could get. I remember one time. This goes back to our earlier discussion of my view of the Montagnard soldiers— I’m sorry, of the Vietnamese soldiers. Our Vietnamese camp commander had a birthday party to celebrate and he ordered that all the Montagnards participate in a two-day celebration of his birthday and that each Montagnard company produce for consumption four or five of these large crocks of rice wine. On the occasion of his birthday, everybody—we were making the rounds from Montagnard company to Montagnard company to Montagnard company and each of these companies had three or four of these crocks of rice wine. Everybody was sitting there sipping on the rice wine in the Montagnard tradition and really getting snockered real quick with this stuff cause it’s just rot-gut whiskey. Joel Sapp and I, we got so drunk that we decided between the two of us that we could no longer drink any more of this stuff because we were going to die. We were going to get food poisoning or something and die. We both figured out. Yet we couldn’t lose face as ugly Americans and we couldn’t lose face in front of the Vietnamese commander. We certainly didn’t want to lose face in front of our fighting force of the Montagnards. So Joel and I, as drunk as we were, we had this brilliant sanity idea that we would pretend to be even drunker. We would stumble into the party area where everybody was drinking the rice wine and we would pick up these rice wine crocks and pour them over each other just to avoid—I mean, spill the rice wine out onto the floor or the dirt to avoid having to drink the damn stuff. (Laughs) So that’s we did! Of course, all the Montagnards thought it was
the greatest thing in the world to see the drunken Americans pour the rice wine over each
other. We’d lay on the ground and pour it. I’d lay down and Joel would pour it on me
and then he’d lay down and I’d pour it on him. Then we’d get up and pretend to be even
drunker than we were and stumble to the next party and do the same thing.

LC: Providing amusement for everybody.

RK: Providing amusement so that we wouldn’t have to drink anymore of this
stuff. I remember—well, gosh, you mentioned the word poison. We’re young men.
We’re scared. We’re away from home. We’re experiencing things we’ve never
experienced before and having to deal with that. So alcohol and drugs became an escape.
I mean, however stupid it was, Laura, and as I look back on it now in all these years, the
risk that I personally took and the risk at which I put my men in by being drunk is
unforgivable to me. It’s one of the things that shakes my soul now to think that I was so
stupid then as to get so snockered that had we been attacked I would have been utterly
useless and probably would have deserved to die under those circumstances if we’d have
gotten attacked, but at the time you don’t think rationally. You think of escape. You
think of forgetting that you’re separated from your family. You think of forgetting what
might have happened to a colleague or a comrade and you just—Christmas Eve between
1968-69, Joel and I got so drunk in the team house. We were shooting live .45-caliber
pistols at each other while we held in our hands dead soldiers cause if you drink a bottle
of Jim Beam or you drink a bottle of Granddad or whatever the hell it was and it’s empty
it’s a dead soldier and it’s got to die. So we’re standing in the team house, I mean not
even ten feet apart from each other, staggering around holding these bottles of empty
whiskey, shooting them out of each other’s hands. I mean, hell, we could have killed
each other! Well, one of us would have killed one first then the other would have
stopped, but I look back on that and I say to myself “God, it’s a miracle I’m alive!” It
makes me think of other things as well, but so yeah, the poison of choice was beer,
alcohol. I did smoke marijuana once. That was—

LC: Bob.

RK: That was a crazy story.

LC: Now was this while you were up, was it during this tour or was it later on?
RK: Yeah. Oh, yes. Yeah. Well, in fact it was that very celebration that I just mentioned. Don’t say Bob in such a bad way.

LC: I’m saying that because did you inhale?

RK: Well, yes. I did inhale.

LC: Reference to our past president.

RK: Yes indeed. Reference to Mr. Clinton. Yes. I did—

LC: Bob, here’s what I think. You’re a Special Forces guy and if you had some marijuana I’m thinking it might not have been the best place and time choice, but probably you were up to it if you know what I’m saying. (Laughs) So this was the same night, the birthday celebration?

RK: Well, it was in that—see, in between Christmas, in Christmas ’68-’69, they had a seventy-two-hour truce and during that seventy-two-hour truce we were not supposed to conduct offensive combat operations. You could conduct defensive patrols around your perimeter to make sure you weren’t being snuck up on and so on and so forth, but you weren’t supposed to do that. So you had a sense that the enemy was not going to be attacking you. So it was a time to let your hair down and celebrate and so everybody just got snockered drunk. During that time Joel and I and the other NCOs—to be honest and fair to them I’m convinced in my recollection that Joel and I were far drunker than any of those guys ever got. I don’t know why we just did it, but we did. We ran out of booze. We drank the camp dry. So I remember that someone said something to one of the Vietnamese who said something to one of the Montagnards who ran out into the perimeter and came back half-an-hour, an hour later with what was then, Laura, a forty-nine cent bag of Frito-Lay potato chips filled with fresh Vietnamese marijuana. Now, that was probably a forty-nine cent bag back then was twelve inches tall maybe.

LC: Yeah. The big party size.

RK: Yeah. Yeah. It was filled with pot! I had never smoked marijuana in my life. I had never smelled it. My father, we never even discussed it, but suddenly all the younger NCOs their eyes got as big around as silver dollars. We all ran down into our tunnels to get our pipes because often times it was much easier to get pipe tobacco through the Army resupply than it would be to get cigarettes. So everybody had a pipe
for smoking pipe tobacco. So I ran down, I got my pipe, and the next thing you know
I’m smoking a bowl of marijuana on top of all the drinking that I had done. It didn’t take
long and I was on planet Pluto. God, I was wasted.

LC: I believe it. I completely believe it.

RK: I remember wrapping—I’ve got a picture. I’ve got a picture in my
collection, and by the way—side note—I do intend to donate a lot of things to the
archive.

LC: Okay. We can talk about that for sure.

RK: I’ve decided to do that.

LC: Okay great. I’m glad.

RK: I remember wrapping my bed sheet around me and jumping headfirst off of
the team house bar onto the concrete floor screaming, “Superman!” Not once but
repeatedly until I was unconscious. My friend Joel Sapp, bless his heart, he brought me
around after enough of this Tom-foolery and he patted me on the back and he said, “I
think you’ve had enough of this Superman. Just go to bed.”

LC: That’s what friends are for.

RK: Yeah, that’s what friends are for. Joel Sapp, he was a marvelous young
soldier and he was the psychological warfare operations officer. He charged with the
responsibility of participating in the Chu Hoi program, charged with the responsibility of
trying to get the enemy to surrender before worse things happened. He did his job to the
best of his ability, but we were both just young kids. Yeah.

LC: Bob, if you would tell me a little bit about the first operation that you went
on outside of the A camp that you’ve been telling us about.

RK: Sure. I had been at the A camp about three weeks, well, not more than three
weeks, and it was my turn to go out on combat operations. I was the newest member of
the camp and the junior officer so I prepared myself. You packed your rucksack and you
got yourself ready and you did your operations and intelligence and gathered all the
supplies and briefed all the people that you were supposed to do. I remember that our
senior medic, Sgt. First Class [Edgar Murell] was his name. Let’s see if I can remember
how to spell it. I think he was M-O-R-E-L-L. He volunteered, bless his heart. He was
about ready to DEROS and go home, but he volunteered to accompany the new
lieutenant out on his first combat operation. Our job essentially was there had been some reports of some enemy activity up in the vicinity of Dak Sut to our north. We were just to take a company of Montagnards out and stroll our way up to Dak Sut along Highway 14 and hopefully find out what was going on but hopefully not get in too much trouble.

LC: Now, was this essentially an intel-gathering and observation mission?

RK: Yes. Yes. Essentially that. The expectation was that we probably would not encounter any NVA forces or things like that, any of the Viet Cong or anything, but there was always certainly that possibility.

LC: What did you know about Dak Sut and its position at this time with regard to enemy activity?

RK: Almost nothing other than that it was an abandoned Special Forces camp. I didn’t have a lot of information about what had happened at Dak Sut. I can’t recall consciously trying to find out a lot about it, either. I just remember that I was, you know, I was anxious about this first combat operation. I was anxious to prove myself to the Montagnards as a competent leader and anxious to demonstrate to Sergeant Murell that I could be a good lieutenant and do what I was supposed to do in a leadership role while at the same time listening to his instructions. I made no pretense that I knew more about it than he did because I knew that I was a rookie and very naïve about this. So I was terrified—well, not terrified. I was anxious, I guess, is a better word as any to use.

LC: Well, now is Murell the kind of person who would share information with you?

RK: Yes. He was a fairly outgoing man. He was a long, tall drink of water. I believe he was African American. I don’t know why I can’t picture him in my mind. I’ve tried for years to remember all the names of all the members of the A camp and some I can and some I simply can’t. I wonder why my mind won’t let me recall all their names because they were all special men. I do believe that Sergeant Murell was an African-American soldier and that was particularly—well, I shouldn’t—in retrospect it was particularly kind of him to do that for me.

LC: Are you thinking about the race politics of that time?

RK: Well, I’m thinking of a man who could have said no. I’m thinking of a man who was within thirty days of going home to whatever awaited him at home who
certainly could have talked with the other NCOs and talked with the team commander
and probably got someone else to join me on my first operation. I’m thinking of a very
generous man who took it upon himself to tuck me under his wing of experience and take
me out into the field for the first time and do the damnedest he could to make sure I came
back alive.

LC: That’s pretty incredible.

RK: Yeah. I mean it was. When you look back on it I don’t think that I would
have been that generous with my last thirty days, but he did. So off we went. We
followed along the Dak Poko River. We made our way north toward Dak Seang, I’m
sorry, toward Dak Sut. Dak Seang was where I was at. Essentially, it was just kind of a
leisurely stroll in the woods. We encountered no hostile forces of any type. We made
our way to Dak Sut. We found some abandoned barbed wire. We sat around. We had
our couple meals. We spent the night, if I remember correctly. Then we started heading
home back to the A camp.

LC: Would you say, Bob, that you had located then, at least on the evidence that
you could sort of visually take in, that you had located the former SF camp up there?

RK: Oh, yes. Yeah. We located the former SF camp and in fact I have a picture
of Tui leaning up against a roll of barbed wire. There’s an abandoned bicycle nearby.
So, yeah, we had made it, but there were no structures. I can’t remember that there were
any structures there at all. Just an open field that had been clear-cut and you could tell
that something was once there and there were a few artifacts of humanity around but
nothing more than that.

LC: Did you come across anyone on your way up there, anyone at all?

RK: No. Not a soul.

LC: No civilians, no nothing?

RK: Nothing. Now, that was all part of the whole notion of a free-fire zone as
well, Laura.

LC: Yeah. Yeah. Tell us a little bit about that, Bob.

RK: Well, free-fire zones were part of the strategy that I guess the American
policymakers, the big thinkers, had come up with that all indigenous personnel were—
and I’m trying to think of all the other readings I’ve done on this in preparation for the
class that I taught. As part of this free-fire zone policy forces friendly to South Vietnamese government, forces friendly to the Americans, were removed from the countryside. They were either made part of a Special Forces A camp or they were relocated to—gosh what were they called? Well, a type of village. I can’t remember the exact name of the villages now. They were removed from areas so that anybody in the area could be assumed to be unfriendly.

LC: So anyone you came across was, is it fair to say—
RK: Unfriendly.
LC: Okay. Unfriendly and therefore a target.
RK: Exactly.
LC: Potentially, depending on the tactical situation. You wouldn’t necessarily want to open fire but—
RK: Well, no, you did.
LC: Okay. Were you instructed to or did it vary?
RK: It was generally assumed, at least in my memory, that when you were in a free-fire zone anybody you saw was considered enemy and you could open fire. Now, you were supposed to scream at them “Chu Hoi. Chu Hoi,” and try to get them to surrender if they had a weapon or whether or not they had a weapon at all. If there was any hesitation, I mean, you just opened up on them. So the establishment of free-fire zones was a way of kind of creating some sort of field of fire for the American forces and the indigenous forces. It was also an area where American aircraft who had unexpended ordinance could drop their ordinance on their way back to their bases.

LC: Without, presumably, having to preplan much except in the way of knowing where you guys were.
RK: Exactly. Exactly. The presumption was that there was nothing friendly there at all. It was on the way back to Dak Seang along Highway 14 where we encountered the enemy for the first time. I was with Sergeant Murell. Oh, I don’t know, we were walking in column. We had about eighty Montagnards. So we were stretched out pretty long and skinny along the highway there walking back. Of course, by then the highway was not much more than a footpath. Suddenly gunfire erupted from up front.

One thing that the Americans and the South Vietnamese Special Forces could never teach
the Montagnards was fire control. If they had a hundred rounds, they’d fire a hundred rounds. There was this sudden burst of tremendous gunfire up at the front of the column and everybody hit the ground. Murell and I looked at each other and reacted. He grabbed a sixty-milimeter mortar and a few rounds of ammunition for the mortar and a couple Montagnards with him. Together the two of us made our way up to the front of the column where the firing had been, but by the time we got there, there was no longer any firing. I mean, the whole thing probably wasn’t even thirty seconds, but I’ll bet you in the span of thirty seconds they must have fired five-hundred rounds of ammunition in all directions. The lead element, the point element of our Montagnard company, they had their carbines on rock-and-roll and they just fired everything they had and then run backwards if they needed to.

LC: Right. Bob, can I just ask how this column would be set up? Who would you have out in front? Experienced Montagnards?

RK: Yes. There would be experienced Montagnards out in front as sort of a point element separated slightly from the remainder of the column.

LC: Then your position?

RK: Then our position. Yeah. I was probably—oh, I don’t know—maybe I was fifteen to twenty people back, maybe, in the column. Not a long distance.

LC: But could you—

RK: Well, I couldn’t see anything. I couldn’t tell what the hell was going on. It was absolute mass confusion. Just a whole bunch of very rapid gunfire and then silence. By the time Murell and I got up to the front we had our interpreter with us and we found out that the point element had found or thought they had found one lowly, poor Viet Cong trail watcher. Sure enough, there was a guy sitting on the side of the road, or what was left of him, who had—he was probably NVA as it turns out. He might have been part of a larger nearby NVA unit and the only reason I say that is because of what happened next, but as Murell and I got there and we found out what had happened, that there was one enemy laying over in the weeds there by the side of the road. I remember I turned to Murell and this was Sergeant Murell kind of getting the lieutenant’s feet wet. I turn to Sergeant Murell and I said, “What the hell do we do?” He just calmly said, “Well, sir, you have to go over and inspect the body.” I said, “What?” He said, “You have to go
over and make sure this guy’s dead and you should extract from him any belongings, any
intelligence things, anything we could use. If he’s got maps or what that we can use to
gather intelligence.” I thought, “Shit. Well, what’s that mean?” The area by then was
secure. The area was quiet. I didn’t feel in any eminent danger. I made my way over to
where this poor man’s body was riddled with bullets and searched around through his
uniform and his pockets. My hands became red with his blood because he’d been hit
many times by those Montagnards. Poor guy never stood a chance. I don’t even recall
he was armed ‘cause I never found a weapon of any type. He was probably just some
poor private or piss-ant trail-watcher in an NVA unit that got sent over there to sit
alongside Highway 14 and find out what was happening. I recall not finding anything
that I deemed of value intelligence-wise on him at all.

LC: What did he have with him? I mean, what was he wearing? Do you
remember?
RK: He had an olive-green type uniform.
LC: Okay. So he was in uniform.
RK: He was in uniform. He had the black type rubber sandals. He did not have a
pith hat. There were no unit insignia on his body that I recall. He had a small pouch that
contained food. I didn’t find any maps of any sort and that’s why, like I said, I don’t
even think the man had a weapon because I don’t remember that we were able to capture
any weapon and carry it back to the A camp.
LC: Right. Which would have been procedure?
RK: Yes. Yes. Yeah. That would have been taken back to the A camp to use as
contraband to get food. Oh, yeah.
LC: Okay. That’s interesting.
RK: Then this curious thought came to my mind of a souvenir. I use the word
souvenir sort of carefully and not very proudly, but this was the first time I’d seen—well,
I shouldn’t say that. It was the first time I’d seen an enemy soldier killed. So I guess I
felt some sort of weird compulsion to commemorate that, so I took his belt.
LC: Which was made of what?
RK: His belt is an NVA belt and I still have that with me. It is a webbed belt
about two and a half inches wide, olive green in color, with a buckle, a sort of a silver
metal buckle, although it’s not silver, but it’s a light metal buckle with the NVA star in
the center of that. So based on that I’m presuming he was a member of an NVA unit. I
don’t think that he was—if he were Viet Cong—of course, it’s even more difficult for me
to think of him being as Viet Cong because there were no villages nearby for him to base
himself out of.

LC: He would’ve—yeah. Yeah. I think that’s right.

RK: Yeah. If he were a member of a village Viet Cong organization he would
have—so I’m thinking he was probably an NVA soldier.

LC: As you say, not the company commander. He’s traveling light, it sounds
like.

RK: Yeah. He was traveling light. He was probably the low man on the totem
pole in the hierarchy of that particular organization.

LC: Any idea how old he was, Bob?

RK: He was a young man to my recall. I don’t think he was—he couldn’t have
been much more than twenty.

LC: So you got the belt.

RK: I got the belt and I left the body by the side of the roadway there and
returned to Sergeant Murell and told him essentially I hadn’t found anything, but I got
this belt. He said, “Well, that’s kind of nice,” and so forth. Then we packed up and left.

LC: Now, did you have concerns about the information that he might have been
able to relay or did you feel pretty safe as you continued on down 14?

RK: We felt pretty safe as we returned down. In fact, at that point I think we
were only a day outside of Dak Seang. We felt confident that if a larger force had heard
the gunfire that they had either ran or gotten—I don’t remember that we had—obviously
there was a heightened sense of awareness and security as we made our way back to Dak
Seang. I do recall feeling very good to be back inside the concertina wire of the camp,
but we never encountered anything else at all, Laura.

LC: I’m just looking at the notes that you provided, Bob, and talking about this
incident. Our question to you in our preparatory paperwork was about your initial
expectations, how did this measure up. You wrote, I think, an interesting response and if
you don’t mind I’ll quote it here.
RK: Sure.

LC: You said, “I was expecting more intense firing the first time I came upon the enemy.” Was there some kind of lingering sense that this had been kind of anti-climactic or were you kind of glad to be out of it as essentially—?

RK: Well, both. I mean I did have a sense that when I first came upon an enemy that it wouldn’t be just one person without a weapon. I expected that perhaps my first firefight would involve someone shooting at me. That’s the basic definition of a firefight. So I mean it was anti-climactic in that it wasn’t as dramatic. It wasn’t as large of a scale as my mind had anticipated, but, yes, at the same time I was very glad that that encounter was over and that I’d gotten my feet wet, so to speak, in a relatively benign sort of way. If that makes any sense.

LC: Yeah, it does actually. It’s interesting. All of the men for whom you had command responsibility also came back. That’s nothing to be ignored, but it is interesting because—well, I don’t know. You’re a Green Beret. Last time we talked you’re talking about how big this made you feel, you know, to have that training and to have accomplished that. I mean, there’s a little—

RK: John Wayne was nowhere to be found on that first combat operation.

LC: Yeah.

RK: It wasn’t there, so yeah.

LC: You learn something about—one learns something about oneself in those situations, I suppose.


LC: So you arrived back at A camp. Now, this entire operation would have unfolded over a series of days, is that accurate?

RK: Yes. It was about fourteen days, fourteen to fifteen days.

LC: Okay. Over that entire time this was the only, let’s say—I don’t really like this, but for shorthand let’s say “action” quote unquote.

RK: Yes. Oh, yeah. That was. It’s very accurate.

LC: Okay. Fourteen days, wow.

RK: There might be a better word for action, but it’ll suffice for now.

LC: We know what we’re talking about.
RK: Oh, yes. That was the only enemy activity that we encountered at all. The rest was, just as I said earlier, just like a stroll down the street.

LC: Did you make any observations about, I don’t know, the state of the road or any observations on trails that you thought might recently have been used that you thought would be of tactical utility that you might have passed on or was it just very quiet?

RK: Very quiet. Very quiet. As I said, Highway 14 had been abandoned for so long as a communications route of any consequence that it was overgrown. So yeah, there was no sign of any type of enemy movement along the road. No footprints or no grass or other stuff that had been laid down. No. It was all pretty quiet as you said.

LC: Were you on a wire, I mean, if you know what I’m saying, during this time? This is your first patrol and you did have that encounter with the person who was apparently watching the trail, but I mean were you living on adrenaline?

RK: Oh, yes. Yeah.

LC: Is that fair?

RK: Yeah. That’s fair to say.

LC: Okay. Okay. I’m trying to visualize this in listening to you and I’m thinking I would have been on a high that wouldn’t even been real.

RK: Yeah. There was a lot of adrenaline involved. I remember that Murell and I kind of, as I said, we looked at each other and we realized we had to do something. If indeed it was a larger force that we could no longer stay just crouched along the road. We had to get up and move forward. So as I said, he grabbed a sixty-millimeter mortar so that we could fire off into the weeds if we needed to, but by the time we got there it was over.

LC: Bob, if you would, can you just talk a little bit about the terrain that we’re talking about in this part of the country? How much in the way of canopy or large trees and how much in the way of more or less brush area? Can you give a description?

RK: Sure. A-245 Dak Seang is located east of what’s known as the tri-border area where Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos all came together. It’s in part of the Central Highlands. It’s a mountainous terrain. Some of the mountains [are] quite steep and relatively tall and formidable to climb, but for the most part there’s no canopy until you
were to get into the mountains, maybe, where there was much more vegetation. This area along Highway 14, along the Dak Poko, was open like a valley, pretty gently sloped, relatively flat to walk on. Vegetation, a variety of different types of vegetation that would accompany a river environment, tall grasses up to maybe, oh, four or five feet in height in places. Aside from that, Laura, that’s about all I can recall. I mean, it was not a jungle. It was not a dense jungle situation at least in this immediate area. Now, as I said, when you got closer to the mountains and you started to go upslope you encountered trees. Then you had a canopy above you and the vegetation got to be pretty dense at that time, but in this particular area you could compare it perhaps to an African—what am I trying to think of a type of terrain—

LC: Savanna?


LC: As you say, you’re essentially following at this part anyway of your tour you’re working along the river valley which, of course, Route 14 at this area sort of followed at least for part of its length there and obviously because of the easy features rather than trying to go along a ridgeline or something.

RK: Exactly.

LC: Now, after this first tour, if you will, this first fourteen day walkabout, with the encounter with the trail watcher, how long would you be essentially out of the [rotation before] doing another combat operation?

RK: A couple weeks.

LC: Okay. So you might spend a couple weeks at the camp?

RK: Yes. Yeah. I can’t speak for other Special Forces commanders. Captain Chiles, Jimmy B. Chiles, was my commander and we weren’t organized nor did we have the manpower all the time to have consecutive constant combat operations going out.

LC: You weren’t that size, anyway, the camp wasn’t.

RK: Yeah. We weren’t that large in number so one combat operation would go out with one company of Montagnards. Perhaps there would be a two-day or three-day interval and then another two Special Forces soldiers would take another company out for ten to fourteen days or so. We were small enough in size that it was not wise tactically to have two companies out away from camp at the same time.
Because obviously that would leave the camp vulnerable.

Although I never spoke with Captain Chiles about this I’m pretty sure that, you know, he had made some kind of conscious decision tactically not to have more than fifty percent of your fighting force away from camp at any one time. So, because of that then you came back to camp and you had, as you said, you had anywhere between a week-and-a-half to two weeks or so before you were back in the rotation and headed back out again, yes.

Would you go out with the same group, the same company, of Montagnards that you had gone out with before or might there be variation?

There would be variation. Yeah. That would depend upon how recently any particular company of Montagnards had been out in the field. Yeah.

Okay. During this kind of two-week, I guess, downtime relative anyway to working a combat op, how often would someone use the airstrip or how often would a helicopter come in? How often would you get resupplies? Would you get mail, that kind of thing?

Almost daily.

Really?

Yeah, almost daily.

Gosh, okay.

Yeah. There was a sense of isolation, but we had frequent contact with helicopters and C-123s. There are a couple of comical stories attached to that as well.

I don’t doubt it.

Sometimes a slick would be accompanied by Cobras for protection, but generally just a slick would fly in because our B team, Kontum B team, was only a short helicopter ride to the south, not a very long ride to the south at all.

So they might be hitting both locations with the resupply?

They would—a resupply ship would come out of Kontum with ammunition—well, not ammunition—but mail, maybe some medical supplies, perhaps some food.

What about water?
RK: Gosh. Water, we—that’s an interesting thing. Damn. Water. Well, we got water buffalos delivered to us. They would fly them underneath the Chinooks, the CH-47s.

LC: Like in a sling or something?

RK: Well, they would be—I’m not talking about a live water buffalo.

LC: Right. This is what you called—

RK: They were big black containers. I think they carried five-hundred gallons of water. They were wheeled. They had wheels on them and they had a tow bar that they could be towed behind other larger wheeled vehicles.

LC: These were in slang known as water buffaloes.

RK: Yeah. We called them water buffaloes. We had those, but I don’t recall that our camp had a well. I don’t think we had any on-sight water supply. Evidently the water must have come from the water buffaloes. That’s an interesting question. That’s one of things where my memory is pretty fuzzy on. As the executive officer of the A team my days were filled with payroll matters. I was responsible for paying the Montagnards. Logistical things. I mean, everything the team commander did not want to do fell to me. I was in between operations. I was pretty much of a high priced clerk taking care of the pay, taking care of ordering supplies if necessary, doing a variety of different types of reports.

LC: If I can ask, Bob, how would the Montagnards be paid? What would they be paid in?

RK: You ready?

LC: I’ll go for it. Yeah. Why not?

RK: Well, this was another part of the, I don’t know, the lighter side perhaps a little bit of the corrupt side of the whole shenanigans over there.

LC: Okay. Sure.

RK: The Montagnards were paid in piasters. The CIA continued to provide us with money to pay our Montagnards. I use the word CIA, although I really don’t have any proof of that, but they were charged early on with, as I said, the recruitment of the Montagnards and endearing them to the American cause with the promises of money and
LC: Sure. Which if you were a Montagnard in the 1950s that was probably not that bad a deal.

RK: Yeah. Not a bad deal. I’ll join up with you guys and you’ll keep me safe from the Vietnamese people that I don’t like.

LC: Right. They had been kicked around a bit.

RK: Yeah. So as the executive officer of the A Team one of my duties was as a financial officer I was responsible for paying the Montagnards. I would fly to Kontum on a helicopter once a month. I would take a couple, three Montagnard bodyguards with me. I would pick up a duffle bag full of money. Three, four hundred thousand piasters. Then I would also be charged with a monthly report about how many Montagnards I had recruited from the hillsides.

LC: You personally or the unit?

RK: Well, the unit. The unit. Well, there were no more to be recruited. They were already abandoned. For the purposes of these reports—I mean, I learned this my second month as the A Team exec. The first two months I was pretty naïve, but when I was down in Kontum and Pleiku talking with other executive officers they put me on to this little scheme. You just make up names. So I would submit a monthly report of the Montagnard soldiers that I had recruited. You know, Mui, Tui, Yong, Phong, Pui, Tui, Long, Tang—I just make up a bunch of names and I would recruit them into the Mike Force (Mobile Strike Force) or the strike force, I should say, as corporal I’s married with four children. As a corporal I, you got 7,900 piasters per month, which is about seventy dollars or something like that, American, I think at the exchange rate at that time. So I go down to Kontum. I pick up the payroll. I fly back to the A Team. I would set up the pay table. I’d call the names and it was kind of fashioned after the old American military payday. The soldiers would come up and they’d come to the position of attention. They’d salute and I’d salute them back. I’d give them their money. Well, then I’d call out, “Tui Mui!” All the Montagnards would look around at one another because they never heard of this guy. They didn’t know who the hell he was.

LC: Right. Who the hell is he talking about?
RK: Yeah. Who the hell is this guy talking about, Tui Mui? So I’d tuck away his 7,900 piasters in my back pocket. That went on. Then every time we had a firefight of any consequence at all I would report that a few of these soldiers were killed and the widow and the four children would get a death gratuity payment of 64,100 piasters.

LC: 64,100.

RK: Piasters. So that money would go into the kitty, so to speak. That’s how that ran. I mean, as far as I know I know that I did it. For good or ill I know that I did it on my Special Forces camp. I’m assuming, presuming, that other Special Forces executive officers were doing the same thing.

LC: Well, that’s who told you how to—

RK: That’s who told me to do it. That’s who told me the scheme.

LC: Well, that’s reasonable. So these piasters—

RK: But the Montagnard soldiers were, back to your original question, they were paid monthly and depending upon their rank they received anywhere from 7,900 piasters and up. Of course, that’s what they used to support their lives and their families as well.

LC: Now, let me just ask about how the scheme would play out. You’d have these piasters—

RK: The scheme would play out that I’d end up with a whole bunch of piasters in my possession. About once a month I’d go to Captain Chiles and I’d say, “You know, I need to go down to Kontum for a couple days and decompress here. So I think I’m going to take the first Charlie-Charlie ship or I think I’m going to take the first mail helicopter bird back to Kontum. Can you miss me for a couple of days?” “Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.” So I’d load up my pockets with piasters and I’d catch a ride on a helicopter down to Kontum. I’d spend the weekend in the whorehouses. You know? I made sure my green beret was all cocked off to the side of my head real good and my boots were shined up. I’d get in that helicopter. Most often it would be a slick. I’d tell the pilot, “Give me a nice ride,” and I’d throw some money at him if he wanted it, but they never did. He’d crank it up to about a hundred and ten knots and he’d fly about ten feet off the ground down Highway Fourteen towards Kontum. I remember being so low one time we had to look up to see soldiers on tanks.

LC: Really?
RK: Yeah! Oh, they loved to give us rides. They’d make it like a roller coaster. They’d come screaming down and then they’d put it into a vertical speed of about three and they just go straight up and then straight down.

LC: Now was this just to shake the shit out of you or what?

RK: Just to shake the shit and to give us a thrill, especially if it was a DEROS flight. If you told this pilot you were having your DEROS flight. Man, he would say, “Oh, you want a real good one?” I’d say, “Yeah, give me a good one.” Hell, you’re lucky you didn’t get killed on these things if the helicopter malfunctions in any way. That was it. I remember you’d come in on the top of—he’d slow down, of course, as he got closer and closer to Kontum and to the landing pads in Kontum—but I remember standing up and standing out on the skid of the helicopter doing about eighty knots leaning outside the helicopter throwing piasters out the window. So the girls would see me coming in. I’d make sure they saw my beret and got a view of my face. Then I’d land in Kontum and get a jeep and spend a couple days in paradise before I had to go back out on the A camp.

LC: Wow.

RK: That’s what we do with our money. You’d use the money to purchase food. I mean the Special Forces soldiers ate very, very well. We had Montagnards who could cook for us. I still remember the cherry pie that our A Team cook could cook. I mean he was excellent. We would go back to, oh, say the 4th Infantry Division down at Dak To or other American installations. We’d give them the SKS (Samozariadnya Karabina Simonova) rifles or we’d give them an AK47 or we’d give them some cash. They’d load us up with a pallet of steaks and we’d airlift the steaks up to the camp so we had fresh food every night. I never ate C rations at all the first year.

LC: Really?

RK: Never. When we were in camp we ate better than—in camp we ate like kings. Steak, chickens, duck—whatever you wanted you could get by trading. Then when we went out on combat operations we had the LRPs, the long range patrol rations.

LC: Which by contrast were—?
RK: Those were the dehydrated, light weight—these were the predecessors of what they now call the MREs, or meals ready to eat. Yeah. These were the LL—no—LRPs, long range patrol rations. We call them “lurps”.

LC: Yep, and dehydrated—?

RK: Oh, dehydrated spaghetti with meat sauce or dehydrated—gosh, what were some of the others—meatloaf, I think. I can’t remember all of them.

LC: There’s a scary thought.

RK: Yeah. If you boiled the water hot enough and added enough spices to it you could eat it.

LC: When you were in camp you would have made provision for—?

RK: Oh, gosh, yes. We baked our own bread fresh everyday.

LC: No kidding!

RK: Oh, yeah. We had freezers and refrigerators to store food with. That’s why the generator, the mechanic on the generator, was such an important man in the camp, too.

LC: Yeah. You’d give him whatever he wanted for sure.

RK: Oh, yeah. He got whatever he wanted. Absolutely. Yeah, I mean, we did—

I keep saying the word steaks because it was readily available because a lot of the American units would have—when they went on a stand down or they went back to the rear area for whatever reason they’d always have a steak barbecue and the straight leg infantry unit cooks would have tons of meat laying around. We had pork chops and steak and poultry and fish. Whatever you wanted we had.

LC: Now, Bob, this is totally your call, but you mentioned that not only you but I’m sure lots of guys would go into town when you had time off or could get time off and would visit with the ladies.

RK: Yes.

LC: You won’t embarrass me, and I promise that I won’t tell my mom whatever you’ve said, but if you don’t mind, and again this is your call, can you give me some sense and those people who will be listening some sense of how this was arranged and was their a particular place in Kontum or a particular road? How did this happen?
RK: That is a—no, I’m certainly not, you know—yeah, I’ll talk about it. I don’t know what else to say. The sexual nature of war is always something that is prevalent. I mean, I can’t speak for soldiers now in 2005 and what they may or may not be doing. I’m speaking to a time when the military was not full of women. I’m speaking to a time in Vietnam when especially on a Special Forces A camp you were isolated. At my Special Forces camp there was never any sexual activity between the American soldiers and the Montagnard women. They were the husbands and wives and daughters—I mean, sorry—the wives and the mothers and the daughters of our fighting force. For that, myself and Captain Chiles agreed, that there would be no hanky-panky. So we maintained that policy.

LC: Did you actually have a discussion about it?

RK: Oh, yeah. Yeah. I remember that we spoke about it often because we didn’t want to compromise that. We certainly didn’t want to compromise that integrity that those men had entrusted to us and at the same time we didn’t want to be shot in the back by a jealous Montagnard who found out that somebody had just poked his wife.

LC: Yeah. There’s a morale issue. Right.

RK: Yeah. Now, recognizing the necessity for sex—I don’t know whether necessity for sex is the right way to put it or not—we would, if we felt the need as a team, someone would suggest to myself or someone would suggest to Captain Chiles that we get a helicopter full of girls. It seemed to me as if it were kind of routine. Remember, I mean, I got there in ’68. There was this inertia of activity and behavior that had preceded me.

LC: Yes. That’s absolutely the case. Sure. Patterns were already—

RK: Well, if everybody had the willingness, everybody had the money, then we would just get on the radio and call down to Kontum and talk to the S-5. We’d ask to speak to the S-5, which in reality there was no such thing as a S-5, but the S-5 was the man who would arrange for the hookers, the prostitutes, the sort of recreation officer, if you like. You would just communicate that you wanted four or five girls. Make sure they’re clean, make sure that the bac si checks them out, and they don’t have any infectious diseases. Tell them they’re going to be gone a week, put them on a helicopter, and send them up to Camp 245. The next day here’d come four girls with their western
clothing and their little tiny push-up bras. They’d get off the helicopter full well knowing what to expect. They’d spend a week with us and they’d return richer than their wildest dreams. So that was one way that those kind of urges were taken care of. Then the other way would be to do it individually as I did from time to time. Soldiers would find—you didn’t have to have an excuse. You would just ask for time off or in between trips to the field for combat operations if things were slow and the commander or somebody said, “Take a couple days, go down to Kontum, get laid, and come on back.” So that’s what you did. Now, there was not any particular formality to it once you got into Kontum. I mean, there was an area of houses as part of the outskirts of the area of Kontum far enough away from the B team compound that you’d take a jeep, but basically that was about it, Laura. I mean, it wasn’t much more complicated than that. You were always concerned for your safety so you took care of that and you carried a firearm with you. Whether you had a big, large M-16 or an AR-15, which is what I carried, or sometimes you’d have that and then you’d have a .45 or a .38 or something. So you provided for your safety and at the same time you provided for your amusement. Then you went back to work.

LC: Can I ask, what about being sexually safe? Did you guys, not you specifically, Bob, but I mean in general, were the guys actively concerned about picking up something?

RK: No. Indeed, I fell victim to one of those diseases. Speaking only for myself and with the general view of other soldiers, you didn’t carry around a package of prophylactics in your back pocket. You just had sex, unprotected sex, stupidly, emotionally, passionately, but not with—you weren’t thinking with your right head.

LC: I’m with you. I hear you. You mentioned though that the bac si might be involved at some point with some of the women who were doing this on a regular basis and weren’t these—

RK: Yeah. There was an attempt to—I know for Special Forces at the B team level they had outreach programs. It would be sort of naïve to think that there wasn’t prostitution going on. So Special Forces commanders at the B team level, who wanted their soldiers to remain disease free, would probably have gotten involved in telling their medics, “Well, why don’t you set up a sick call for the local girls and try to get them to
come in. Let’s get them checked out and make sure that our men are frequenting those girls who we know to be clean.”

LC: Okay. So, there would be some system maybe at a higher level but when you were on your own, you were on your own.

RK: When you were on your own you were on your own. If you went into the wrong house with an unknown girl then you took your chances and sometimes you paid the consequence. Yeah.

LC: I mean, aside from the sort of physical gratification issues, did you feel anything?

RK: Oh, yes. I know exactly where you’re heading with that question and yes. You know, it’s a tough issue, Laura, and it’s a tough issue but it’s an issue I think that has to, at least I can tell my side of it. I mean, I knew I was a married man. I knew that the woman I had left behind was pregnant. My son Gregory was born in August so before, during, and after this, that’s the kind of activity, but you’re so damn lonely. You’re so emotionally vulnerable that whether or not a Vietnamese girl was a prostitute you wanted to have some kind of connection with something kinder, something gentler, than you. You wanted a kind of a form, a girlfriend relationship. I don’t know. Maybe in a way replace the emotional relationship that you had left behind in America as a surrogate companion. Not only a sexual companion but an emotional companion, as well. I remember that I tried to involve myself with women who had some English-speaking skills so that I could pretend to have a conversation. Ladies who were somewhat intelligent—I mean, I missed that kind of emotional attachment, so yeah. There was the brute, guttural notion of just visiting a house of prostitution and getting your rocks off and leaving without any attachment at all, but at the same time there was—this will come later in other interviews, but during my second tour there I actually formed a friendship with a Vietnamese woman who I called my girlfriend. I felt proud of that. I got myself in trouble by trying to visit her when I wasn’t supposed to because I had to see her and share a dinner with her, a bottle of wine, just simple things like that—going out to dinner at night, you know, kind of a thing. So yeah, I think it is an aspect of that war, that conflict, but at the same time, I mean, I’m convinced that there were some men who remained celibate. I don’t know how the hell they would have done it, but they remained
celibate and loyal physically to their wives or girlfriends who had been left behind. I
don’t think of myself as being weaker or—well, weaker might be, maybe, but not nastier.
I didn’t do anything sexually to hurt anyone who I had left behind—certainly not. I knew
full well what I had left behind, but—I don’t know how to say it. It’s easy to say it just
happened, but that’s kind of the truth. Does that make any sense at all?
LC: It seems—you’ve done a great job of explaining it and this is hard stuff to
talk about because—I think you hit it directly. Go ahead Bob.
RK: Well, the thing, the notion is, Laura, also I mean if I’m looking at it from my
first wife’s point of view. She’s an intelligent woman and certainly realized that here’s a
twenty-one, twenty-two-year-old man going off to war in the prime of his sexual life.
What are my expectations of him that he’s going to remain celibate? How am I going to
deal with my feelings thinking about whether or not he’s celibate? I’m sure in my case—
well, I’m sure that it caused many, many difficult times between husbands and wives, and
boyfriends and girlfriends. Some of those difficult times led to much more tragic things.
Divorce being at the bottom of that scale.
LC: Right. Undoubtedly because of course we’re talking about people’s
emotions.
RK: Yeah.
LC: Separation is never good.
RK: I mean, I don’t feel proud of what I did, certainly. My goodness sakes, no!
I mean, I’m not proud to say, “Well, I was a real cocksman when I was in Vietnam.”
That’s silly. You’re in the middle of war. You don’t know if you’re going to live from
day to day. So you drink excessively and you screw excessively. That’s basically what
happens. At least it happened to me. I certainly can’t speak for other veterans.
LC: Right. I’ll just point back to what you said before, Bob, which I think is
really important here. You said you were lonely and I can’t imagine anyone who can’t
sympathize with that and see that.
RK: Yeah. You do develop such a tremendous camaraderie with your fellow
soldiers, but it doesn’t replace the loneliness that you feel, at least in that situation. I
mean even now with the Iraqi situation going on. Those poor soldiers, there’s such a
sense of loneliness.
LC: Yeah. Do you think it’s better now, Bob, that—?
RK: I don’t think it’s better. I mean, gosh—
LC: They can send email messages and—
RK: Yeah. If we had been able to send email messages, oh, my goodness. If we
had been able to do the, what is it, blogging phenomenon or sending emails or—
LC: Getting phone calls once a week or even more.
RK: Oh, God! Yeah. The only way we could communicate, we had an FRC
single sideband 93 radio and we could, our senior commo operator, Sergeant Holmes. He
could fine tune that thing and we could talk to Houston, Texas, loud and clear and the
radio operators, the ham radio operators in Houston, Texas, would patch us into the
phone lines and we could talk to America that way, but occasionally.
LC: Yeah. How often would you have a chance to do that?
RK: Maybe once every three weeks or so. If climactic conditions were right, all
those other things were right so that we could actually make contact with the ham
operators.
LC: Well, speaking on the side of the ledger, when did you find out about your
son’s birth?
RK: He was born August 27th of 1968. I found out vis-à-vis the Red Cross
because even by then my first marriage had begun to deteriorate a little bit.
LC: Now this has partly got to be about separation.
RK: Yeah. Partly about separation and I think being married so young, being
married so young in our relationship together, my wife’s first child, her being alone. She
had reasonably good support from her family in America but, suddenly she finds herself a
young mother. The claim was made that she couldn’t get in touch with me. Now, that
may or may not have been true. It might have been one of those times when we simply
didn’t have communications up and going effectively, but I did get a radio message from
the American Red Cross saying that my son had been born and that mother and child
were doing well. So that was a very happy day, too.
LC: Well, on some level, regardless of how you and your wife were
communicating or not, finding out that you’re a dad is a big deal. It’s a big deal.
RK: Yeah. I remember that it followed the big battle that happened there at Dak Seang, which I’m sure we’ll talk about, but it followed that very big battle. I remember that I ran out to one of the 4.2-inch mortars that we had and I picked up an HE (high explosive) round out of the ammunition storage area and grabbed a grease pencil. I wrote across it, Gregory Daniel Kreger. Take that you sons-of-bitches! I let it fly off into the enemy’s direction in celebration of my son’s birth. Hell of a way to celebrate somebody’s birth—fire at the enemy. August the twenty-seventh.

LC: Let’s take a break there for a second.

RK: Okay.
Interview with Robert Kreger
Date: December 9, 2005

Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Dr. Robert Kreger. Today is the ninth of December 2005. I am in Lubbock as usual and Bob is speaking by telephone from California. Good afternoon, Bob.

Robert Kreger: Good afternoon, Laura.

LC: Actually, I think in your case it’s still morning.

RK: Yes.

LC: We’re just a little ahead of you over here but very grateful again, of course, to have your time and your input into the oral history project.

RK: Again, for myself I’m just thrilled and honored to be apart of it.

LC: Well, this is just a very revealing information packed interview that we’ve been doing so far and I’m very glad to continue that.

RK: Good.

LC: Bob, we had spoken in some detail about the setup at the camp. This is during your first tour, ’68-’69. The arrangement of the camp, the relationship with our allies in that area, the Montagnards, with whom you were working, and also your first encounter with an enemy soldier who was a trail watcher and you told us about that experience. I know from the material that you provided us that there were other encounters with the enemy and I wonder if you can take us to one of those other encounters.

RK: Yes, of course. Following the story of the first encounter with the enemy, the trail watcher as we spoke of last time, that would have—well, everything at the camp seemed to be going according to everyday operations, nothing out of the ordinary. Combat operations coming and going and not a great deal of contact. In fact, almost none that I can recall. Things seemed to be falling into place. I certainly had gotten into a routine of being the executive officer of the camp and being responsible for the added duties that an XO (executive officer) has with the paperwork and logistics and payroll.
and things such as that. Everything, like I said, everything seemed to be going quite 
normal.

LC: Had you guys been much affected by the upsurge in activity that followed 
what we think of as the Tet Offensive in the spring of 1968? There was, of course, what 
others talked about as being kind of the follow-on Tet in May ’68. Was there much in the 
way of additional activity that you were aware of in your neck of the woods up in Dak 
Seang?

RK: No, not that I can recall. Let’s see. I’m trying to look at the geography of it 
here in my mind as we speak. Dak To was to our south. Ben Het was to our north, I 
believe. We could hear reports from time to time on the radio or in other channels that 
there had been some probings by the enemy at the camps, but nothing at our camp and no 
intelligence coming down to us to indicate that there was any activity that we ought to be 
aware of. As I said, I’m almost tempted to use the word complacent, at least at our camp. 
Certainly routine would be an appropriate word. We were kind of sitting back fat, dumb, 
and happy and going about our daily routines and keeping a watchful eye, of course, but 
not aware of any reason for any heightened sense of security or awareness. Indeed, what 
was interesting leading up to the battle there of 18 August, to our north just a few—oh 
gosh, I don’t know, maybe not even a thousand meters I don’t think. Well, it might have 
been a little bit longer than that—was a small firebase called Nui Ek.

LC: Do you know how to spell that one, Bob?

RK: Well, not really but it’s probably N-U-I E-K perhaps, although that’s just a 
stab. It was just a small hilltop and had been abandoned for quite some time. We 
received word that a half-battery of 105s were going to be airlifted in there. We didn’t 
know why. Probably in support of another operation that was going to be held in our 
area. We were asked to provide a company of Montagnards in support of that firebase.

LC: Now this would be Army?

RK: Yes. This was. As I recall this was an Army unit that was coming in for a— 
half-battery, three guns of a 105 battery. So we organized the Montagnard and we had I 
believe—well, we had two Americans assigned to that company of Montagnards. In the 
days, oh, two days perhaps, preceding August eighteenth—I’m guessing as I recall—the 
firebase came in and the company of Montagnards walked up to the firebase with
probably, I don’t know, maybe a half a day’s walk perhaps. I’m not sure. And established their defensive positions around the firebase. On Saturday of August eighteenth we were asked to help the battery of guns to fire in their locations and to re-zero their weapons as they always had to do.

  LC: Now by re-zero, can you lead someone who might not be familiar with that reference through what that means?
  RK: Well, not being an—
  LC: Not an artillery guy.
  RK: Not being an artilleryman, as I understand, each time that an artillery piece is moved, of course, the precision of that particular instrument is affected by the movement.
  LC: I see. Mm-hmm.
  RK: Then you have to adjust for altitude. You have to adjust for perhaps other physical and or climactic features in that local area so that when the gun fires you’re going to ensure that it’s accurate. If you load in a certain amount of data into the firing mechanism, you want to be sure that the weapon is responding to that new data. So you have to recalibrate it. It’s a process that is certainly very beneficial for the weapon, of course, and the men there. We were asked to fire in defensive concentrations, which are called DEFCONs, as a sort of a practice exercise there on Saturday morning. In so doing, we would be zeroing the weapons and recalibrating the weapons that brought a new firebase there. Well, Captain Chiles and myself, team commander Jimmy Chiles, the two of us went up into the small observation tower that we had in the center of our compound. We assisted the half-battery of 105s to zero in their weapons. We fired in three, no we fired in two defensive concentrations on the short axis of our A camp, one to our west remembering that the A camp was situated rectangularly with the long axis on the north-south side and the short axis to the east-west side. So we fired in a defensive concentration, and I believe we named it 7700. Then a second defensive concentration to the east of our camp and I think we called that 7701.
  LC: What were you firing with?
  RK: Oh, probably just HE rounds, high explosive rounds. We would give the coordinates that we wanted the round to land vis-à-vis the radio to the firebase and then
they would transfer that data in to the guns and fire. We’d make corrections. Left one
hundred, drop two hundred, or something like that, meters, indicating you missed it by
that much and make your adjustments and then come back and fire again.

LC: Okay. So you’re checking them off on their accuracy.

RK: That’s right. We’re going through a procedure whereby the gun is sure that
it’s firing to the coordinates that it’s being asked to fire to. When Captain Chiles and
myself were satisfied that the guns were accurate and the firebase was satisfied that the
guns were accurate we concluded that little exercise. It was a bright, sunny, warm
Saturday day in August. The rest of the day went as normal. We had our evening meal.
We watched a movie probably. There were six of us Americans in camp at the time and
we had—let’s see now, because we had one other company of Montagnards out on
another operation on one of the normal patrols with two other Americans. Boy, I hope I
get this accurate. So in camp at that time we probably had about, I don’t know, two
hundred or so fighting Montagnards and then the six Americans.

LC: Now can you tell who the six were? Captain Chiles and yourself—?

RK: Okay. Boy, let me see. Boy. Captain Chiles, myself, Lieutenant [Joel]
Sapp—

LC: Whom you mentioned earlier.


LC: That’s okay Bob. That’s fine.

RK: We might have had a Sgt. First Class [Arthur] Holmes, who was the senior
radio operator, Jakovenko, Sgt. [First Class] Jakovenko. I just don’t recall and I ought to.
I certainly ought to with such an important event but sometimes after thirty years—

LC: Also there may be a protection mechanism going on, too. We’re both old
enough to know that not everything works exactly when you want it to all the time.

RK: Exactly.

LC: But that’s fine. You’re giving us a sense of who was there.

RK: I do know that we had those four, for sure—well, actually [six] of us.

LC: You said roughly two hundred of the Montagnards.

RK: About two hundred or so. Certainly not any more than two hundred and
fifty of the Montagnard strike force with us.
LC: Okay.

RK: It had rained slightly that night. We showed a movie on the outdoor screen to our Montagnards right after nightfall that evening. The six of us Americans were up playing poker until about 2:30 AM as we always did in the evenings. We said our goodnights and crawled down into our hooches to go to sleep in to the bunkers. Captain Chiles was delayed a little bit because he had to make a stop at the latrine. I’m downstairs in my little cubby hole putting on my—I had a pair of cutoff fatigues that I wore as pajamas in the evening. So I’m putting on a pair of cutoff fatigues to get ready to sack out for a while. All of a sudden I heard incoming mortar rounds. We had heard enough of those that we knew that that was precisely what the sound was. I ran out, grabbed my rifle. I put on a pair of flip flop shower shoes and my rifle and the steel pot helmet and flack jacket and ran to the stairs to go up the stairs to see what was going on. Captain Chiles was running down the stairs pulling up his britches. “We’re under attack! We’re under attack!” he says. “Get everybody over to the team house!” So we gathered over in the team house and got communications up and running and reported that we were being attacked. Then we were left to go to our alert positions. For me this was the first time that I had come under such a sustained and large attack. My alert position was an 81-millimeter mortar pit that I and three other Montagnards were assigned to be in for defensive positions under these conditions. It was about twelve, fifteen feet outside one of the doors to the team house. As I went out that door to join the Montagnards who, bless their hearts, they were already there waiting for the lieutenant.

LC: No kidding. No kidding. That’s great.

RK: Oh, yeah. These guys didn’t mess around. They were not afraid of anything. They were tremendous fighters and they knew what was going on probably even before we did. The moment they heard the mortar rounds they scrambled.

LC: They were in position.

RK: They were in position waiting for my instructions to start firing, you know, whatever rounds and whatever charge to put on the mortar and so forth. Well, I came out that door and I could hear the bullets whizzing over the top of my head. I, you know, I got down on my belly and crawled to the mortar pit. It was probably the longest crawl I had ever done. At that time I was very grateful for basic training and teaching how to
crawl underneath fire. I mean, I was kissing that ground. Believe me, I was getting as close to that ground as I could and I made it into the bunker. We began to fire our white phosphorous rounds and HE rounds to the north side of our camp in an arc just sweeping back and forth. We really didn’t have any idea at that time, Laura, the beginning of the battle. The battle started almost precisely at 3:15 AM.

LC: Wow. Mm-hmm.

RK: There was a light rain, enough of a rain, that visibility was somewhat restricted for air cover and any other on-station aircraft. Specifically I’m talking about—I don’t know what the hell they called it, not Puff the Magic Dragon with the gatling guns, but there was another converted aircraft that could fly around and provide defensive fires.

LC: Like a Cobra or something?

RK: No. It was a fixed-wing aircraft. It was a fixed wing aircraft, but I just can’t recall right now.

LC: That’s okay.

RK: I know that Captain Chiles was in the commo bunker directing support.

LC: The weather was the problem.

RK: The weather was against us, as well, but it wasn’t a torrential down pour. So beginning at 3:15, the six Americans, each of us was in a different location and we had walkie-talkies to communicate with one another. Captain Chiles, as I said, was in the communications bunker and he was coordinating with fire support from the two firebases nearby and the battle ensued. Now, I suppose I’ll probably be jumping back and forth as I tell the story.

LC: That’s fine.

RK: I’m sure one of the reasons that we’re all alive today to tell this story is because the enemy made some very important mistakes in terms of a strategy. First of all, they only mortared us for a very short time. The mortar barrage I don’t think lasted two minutes total. We weren’t pinned down. We weren’t so restricted in our movements because of the mortar fire that we could not get to our alert positions that we could not try to begin to assess the seriousness of it and begin to return some type of offensive fire.

LC: Right.
RK: Secondly, from the place where they launched this attack they had left behind a 75-millimeter recoilless rifle to fire at the camp during the assault, but they had not dug it into the side of the hillside appropriately enough so that they could lower the barrel of that rifle low enough to hit anything. So every time they fired the 75 recoilless we could hear it going across the top of the camp compound, but it never hit anything. Now, if they had been able to bring that to bear on us and the buildings inside the compound the story would have been much, much different. I think if they had mortared us long enough and kept us down long enough then the story would be much different, but they didn’t.

LC: Now, what I’m going to guess from this, Bob, is that later you saw the emplacement of the 75-millimeter rifle.

RK: I never personally saw it. We received intelligence from units of the 4th Infantry Division that were up in that area after the battle.

LC: Were you able to learn how far away that emplacement was from the camp?

RK: It was on a hill called 1219. Now, the story is that we had been attacked. Of course, at the time we didn’t know it. We found all this afterwards through intelligence. It was the 101 Delta Regiment from North Vietnam. According to what we learned after the fact they were a relatively fresh unit coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail about 750-men strong. They had camped there on Hill 1219 overlooking our camp—I’m gonna say two-thousand meters away at the most, just a couple clicks away, maybe not even that far—for about two days. They had observed our activities. Indeed they had even watched Captain Chiles and myself fire in the defensive concentrations on Saturday the eighteenth. We never knew they were there. We never had any intelligence at all. We were not patrolling in that area with offensive operations ourselves. As you learn, you always have to respect your enemy and, boy, as I look back on that, you had to have the utmost respect for these North Vietnamese soldiers. I mean, they stayed up there on that hill completely unknown for a minimum of two days that we’re aware of. Then at dusk on Saturday the eighteenth they walked off the hill, came through the jungle, crossed through the Dak Poko River, completely—well, nearly completely—surrounded our compound, dug two battalion sized CPs (command post) into the ground about, oh, ten feet square and about five feet deep. They interlaced communications wires between the
two CPs. Each man in the regiment that was a part of the attack had dug his own foxhole for cover and concealment. They probably even watched the movie that we showed to the Montagnards and attacked us at 3:15 and we never, ever knew they were there. Not one sound, not one clink of an entrenching tool, nothing to indicate that they were right outside of our perimeter wires.

LC: Wow.
RK: Yeah, and I mean, that in itself is quite an accomplishment.
LC: That’s very telling. That tells a lot.
RK: Yeah. We just never knew they were there.
LC: What would be the mechanism that was in place at A camp for alerting you to nearby movements? Would you have foot patrols going out every once in a while?
RK: Yes, we would do that every once in a while but typically not at night.
Daytime foot patrols to look for enemy activity or—
LC: Evidence of anything.
RK: Evidence of it, yes. Trip flares, of course, on the trails coming in and out, for sure. Claymore mines set out, but no. A trip flare never went off. A claymore mine never exploded. It was just a normal Saturday night as far as we knew with a poker game. Then suddenly here comes this attack. Now, they stopped the mortar barrage, I think prematurely.
LC: That was probably a couple of minutes at most.
RK: At most. Then they began the ground assault and to their mistake, which I to this day don’t quite figure out, they attacked us from the east and the west rather than the north and south. Now, perhaps the runway on the north side of the camp prevented them from coming across. Maybe they’d figured that was too exposed for them to cross the runway area, but the majority of their attack came right from the east side and the west side. Surprisingly, Laura, they attacked right up through those defensive concentrations that we had just fired in that Saturday, which I think was another very strategic mistake that they’d made. Now you’ve got to keep in mind, Captain Chiles, he’s downstairs in the commo bunker. He’s eight, ten feet underground tucked away with a lot of concrete. He’s on the walkie-talkie telling Lieutenant Sapp and I to figure out what the hell is going on. We’re above ground running all over the place like, you
know, I don’t want to say John Wayne, but we’re trying to run all over the place and act
like we know what the hell we’re doing. It’s three o’clock in the morning or so. It’s
raining. You can’t really see what the hell is going on, but Joel and I were able to
establish between the two of us that the majority of this ground assault was coming right
up through these defensive concentrations. We just got on the horn and called up to the
firebase and we just began to immediately fire, you know, what they called the flechette
rounds, fire for effect. We didn’t have to go through any zeroing of the weapons because
that had all been done earlier in the day. That worked to our advantage tremendously
because we were able to start giving a battery three fire for effect and that meant that
each gun was going to fire three rounds. We just kept giving that command so each gun
fired three rounds and then another three rounds and then another three rounds. So as
rapidly as the guns could shoot they were shooting nine rounds of high-explosive
ammunition with the—the flechette round is hard to describe. It was a 105-canister on a
timed-release-type fuse that would, again not an artillery man, but it would release
hundreds, I suppose, of razor sharp little barbs and the weapon was designed to
counterattack enemy troops in the open area rather than being dug into any location
because they were above ground. It just began to decimate the enemy.

LC: These are very clearly anti-personnel weapons. That’s their design.
RK: Yes. Yeah.
LC: You’ve described them as sharpened barbs. About how big?
RK: Oh, gosh.
LC: Size of a dime or a—
RK: Yes.
LC: Maybe a little bigger?
RK: No, not any bigger than that. They were perhaps the size of a—take a large
paperclip, a large paperclip. Perhaps that size in diameter, maybe a little bit bigger and
half inch long.
LC: These are nasty.
RK: Oh, yeah. They’re terribly nasty, terribly nasty.
LC: Bob, if I’m right, and please correct me if this is wrong—this is my
impression listening—that the artillery guns, having been set to these test coordinates,
were in fact already leveled for exactly where you need the fire placed.
RK: Yes. Exactly.
LC: Which is very curious because of all the artfulness you’ve described on the
enemy’s part. They surely were also watching where the fire—
RK: Yes. They just, to my recollection, it’s almost as if they marched right up
through those DEFCONs. Then why they did that to this day, as I said, I simply don’t
know. We had artillery support coming in. We had 155 support coming in from our
south. I believe Ben Het was also firing 155 for our support. I don’t know whether
Captain Chiles was ever able to get any 175-millimeter artillery to fire in support, but we
had a tremendous amount of artillery firepower in support. Of course, we had the 4.2-
inch mortars, our 60-millimeter mortars that we were using inside the camp. We had the
small arms fire from the Americans and the Montagnards. We were bringing to bear on
the enemy a considerable amount of firepower. Of course, they were producing their
own significant amount of small arms fire, but they had nothing larger than small arms
except for—well, they had 60-millimeter mortars but they didn’t use them once they
started a ground assault, except for that 75 recoilless which they had made ineffectual
because they didn’t dig it in deep enough.
LC: You could hear those bullets, though, going up above?
LC: Well, Bob can we stay with you in the mortar pit here and then as you are
trying to make your assessments did you leave the mortar pit and try to—?
RK: Oh, yes.
LC: Okay. Can you walk us around with you if you remember how you
proceeded?
RK: Well, I left the Montagnards in the mortar pit and left with them the
instructions to continue firing, just kind of swing the gun back and forth—fire here, fire
here, and fire here, back and forth.
LC: These are the 4.2s?
RK: This was an 81- millimeter mortar.
LC: Oh I’m sorry, yes, of course. You said that before. Yeah.

RK: As I said earlier, the six of us Americans were in walkie-talkie communications with each other. Captain Chiles had instructed Lieutenant Sapp and myself to get up and find out what was going on. The best I can describe, Laura, is that we—I hate to make analogies to movies and Hollywood because it’s seemingly so trite, but—

LC: But it gives us a point of reference, too.

RK: We were crouched low and we were running from building to building trying to find cover and concealment from the small arms fire as we ran around trying to find out if any Americans had been hit, find out what the situation was at the perimeter with the Montagnards, and indeed find out what the Vietnamese Special Forces were doing. I have to also say that we were not the only Americans involved, which—sometimes—I should never forget the fact, but we had a platoon of engineers who were with us.

LC: By with us you mean—?

RK: At the camp.

LC: In A camp?

RK: They were there with us at the A camp, a small platoon of combat engineers who had come up to repair the airstrip. So they were in their own compound, which was outside of ours yet inside the perimeter wire. Again my memory, I wish it were better here, Laura, and I apologize for that.

LC: No, you’re doing well. You’re doing great.

RK: They were under their own command structure from their platoon leader who was with them. Although we coordinated with one another about repelling the enemy it wasn’t a situation where we all joined together. That’s why I kept saying we had six Americans. We had six Special Forces in camp. The other combat engineers, they were equally as heroic. I mean they established a defense around their particular little compound and their equipment that they had and they did their part, as well, to one, to stay alive and, two, to help us repel this assault. Sadly—

LC: They weren’t—

RK: Huh?
LC: Go ahead Bob.

RK: Well, sadly, like I said, I mean whether it’s a trick of my own self-conscious memory or unconscious memory, I’m not sure, but I often times forget that they were with us in this battle. But no, they were there as well. They need to be acknowledged, too. Anything more than that I just simply don’t know.

LC: They were essentially away on the north side.

RK: No. They would be on the south side. They were on the south side.

LC: They were on the south side. Okay. So they were handling their own equipment and so on and not—

RK: Helping to shore up the south side of the camp, yes.

LC: Okay.

RK: The battle ensued and Lieutenant Sapp and I, as I said, we did have to expose ourselves to enemy fire and run around, try to assess the situation. I remember going from alert position to alert position and checking on the other Special Forces soldiers. I remember being on the walkie-talkie with the engineers and making sure they were all right doing what they were supposed to be doing. I wasn’t their commander so I certainly couldn’t give them any commands and I’m sure that their lieutenant was in touch with Captain Chiles, who at that time would have been the overall camp commander certainly. I didn’t get involved in that. I was very busy, one, staying alive and, two, doing what I was told to be doing by Captain Chiles.

LC: What was the fire that you were taking? What was it like?

RK: Well, it was AK-47s. A lot of it pretty intense small arms fire. For me, it was loud and frightening. My adrenaline was just going like crazy. It was scary. I mean, it was unlike anything I had ever experienced but I think my military training served me well. I remember realizing that I was an officer with responsibilities. I had to set an example. Now is not the time to do anything less than your job and do your job the best you can and take care of your men. That’s essentially what motivated me. We were, Lieutenant Sapp and myself, were very busy doing that. We didn’t actually—well, I know from time to time we would stop and crouch down behind the building or something. Then we would shoot off in the direction we thought the enemy was coming with our M-16s or CAR-15s.
LC: Primarily you were relying, is it fair to say, on the Montagnards to return fire while you figured out what was going on?
RK: Yes. Yes.
LC: Okay. Was there a point around the camp that seemed to be the focus of the brunt of the attack?
RK: As I said, yes. From the southwest near one of those battalion command posts that the enemy had established there was a heavy ground assault and almost directly from the east came another very heavy assault. We had, on the east wall of our camp, we had two 81-millimeter mortar pits and one 4.2-inch mortar pit. We had machine gun emplacements up on the corners and we had another machine gun emplacement along about the center of the east wall. We had a .50 caliber up there, and that’s where Sergeant Dilley later, you know, earned a Silver Star at that particular location. One of the 81-millimeter mortar pits was rendered ineffective because it was a hung round in that. We had to wait for that to cool down before we could try to get that out of the barrel.
LC: A hung round is—?
RK: A hung round means that you put the projectile, you put the ammunition, down in to the, you slide it down into the tube, but it malfunctions. It misfires and it never exits the tube.
LC: That’s a little scary, too.
RK: That’s a little scary because if you should drop a second round in on top of it then you’ve got a lot of trouble. We had to solve that situation. During the course of the battle we had this fixed-wing aircraft that came on station, which was capable of firing an awful lot of weaponry. I can’t recall whether it was actually Puff the Magic Dragon. I know there was some kind of name for this weapon but because of the visibility and the low ceiling of the cloud cover all this aircraft could do was to illuminate. So this aircraft constantly let off illumination rounds and dropping flares. The whole area was lit up, starting with 3:30, 4:00 AM. They were very rapid to respond. At one point toward the end of the battle—well, let me before we get there. During the course of the battle we discovered that the enemy had broken through the wire and had breached and was getting very close. On the west side it was not as dramatic as it was on the east side.
west side they had begun to penetrate through the concertina wire and into the area where
the Montagnards lived on the perimeter. There the combat got as close as hand grenade
to hand grenade. We never got down to a hand-to-hand combat situation where the
enemy was so close and so abundant that we had to, you know, drop our rifles and start
knocking them over the head.

LC: But within grenade toss.
RK: Yes. We did engage and I remember doing that and that was not very fun,
but we engaged in throwing hand grenades back and forth at each other on the west side.
Now, on the east side their assault was more effective. They were about to break through
the wire and get very, very close to the perimeter of our camp. They were almost directly
in front of the .50-caliber machine gun emplacement, but it too had malfunctioned.
Sergeant Dilley’s alert position was the other machine gun position in the corner of the
camp which would have been to the south. When we became aware that the .50 caliber
was no longer working, Sergeant Dilley took his machine gun from his placement and
made his way to the .50-cal position. Along the way he got another machine gun. Now,
these were .30-caliber machine guns. I think these were the old M-19A1, I think it was
called, air-cooled machine guns. I think my nomenclature is right. I’m not sure.
Someone who reads this and hears this would be able to—

LC: They can double check. Sure.
RK: Yeah, they can double check. Dilley got up into that bunker with two
machine guns and literally one in each hand and just started firing into the assault as it
came. He was able to repel the enemy from that position, and without his courage at that
point I think things would have been a lot different, too, if the enemy had been able to
break through our last protective barrier and actually get inside the compound into the
heart of our camp. Dilley’s actions there did earn him the Silver Star and it’s certainly
very well deserved. The battle kept on, and in addition to that, of course, Sergeant Dilley
is the medic. He’s running around whenever he can. He’s pumping us full of
amphetamines. We’re all buzzed up on uppers and, you know, I still got my shower
shoes on and my short cut-off pants and a flack jacket and a steel pot. We’re running
around with the adrenaline going and, of course, I don’t think anybody who would have
fallen asleep under those conditions of that, but Sergeant Dilley wanted to make sure
nobody was going to sleep. He kept running around and, “Here, take this!” Then he’d run off and so forth. Bringing it to a close, 6:00 AM came by, 5:00 AM. It was late. We’d been fighting. At the time I had no idea of dead or wounded, casualty sort of assessments. Without the flares constantly you couldn’t see, but when the flares were up you still couldn’t see that you had, you know, it isn’t like some Hollywood movie that you had bodies laying everywhere. I do know that we only sustained two Americans slightly wounded from shrapnel from the mortar rounds. None of the Americans involved was hit with any small-arms fire, which was certainly a blessing.

LC: Well, it’s amazing.

RK: Yeah, it is amazing. Toward the end of the battle, Captain Chiles radioed on the walkie-talkie that he had gotten Combat Skyspots coming in. Now, Combat Skyspot, these were F-4D Phantoms, I believe, maybe F-104s, jet aircraft flying with either 500-hundred or 750-pound bombs and able to come in low right off the deck underneath the cloud cover, cloud ceiling, radar controlled and et cetera, et cetera. Captain Chiles had informed the jets of the DEFCONs, the 7700 and 7701 DEFCON, but he also was smart enough to realize that they were very close to the compound. He gave them the coordinates of the DEFCONs but asked them to drop their bombs, I guess, perhaps another five hundred meters west of the west DEFCON and east of the east DEFCON.

LC: Okay. To spread it out a little.

RK: To spread it out a little bit. I’m telling you, Laura, he had arranged all this, but he hadn’t really—bless his heart—he hadn’t really effectively told us that these jets were going to come screaming in at four hundred knots right off the deck and drop these damn bombs right in our backyard. Those bombs came in and if you can kind of visualize a rectangle in front of you, north-south the long axis, east-west the short axis, and if you turn maybe thirty degrees to that rectangle from the south side and you draw a line on the outsides of that rectangle those jets flew into our area on that sort of axis and dropped their bombs right where they were told to drop their bombs. I thought the world had come to an end. Son of a—I mean, the whole earth just jumped when that ordinance exploded and I mean crap was flying everywhere. Shrapnel and goodness knows what the hell else was flying all over the place besides bodies and things like that. That was what broke the enemy’s back. I don’t think they ever anticipated that we would be able
to bring that kind of firepower on them, but we learned later from one of the regiment’s intelligence officers that we captured that when those bombs dropped their troops just began to scatter and run away from the battle. That happened, I’m going to say that happened probably about 6:00 AM or so in the morning because at that point the battle took a very dramatic turn in our favor. There was a collective sense of the fact that we were not going to be overrun, that we would be saved and that we had the worst of it. None of us ever screamed or shouted hooray or anything like that, but I’m sure if we’d had the presence of mind to we’d all, you know, done a high five with one another, although high fives hadn’t been invented then. You could get a sense and I remember thinking that I was going to live through this at that point. The amount of gunfire abated very dramatically and from about that point on it was just a kind of a matter of mopping up and waiting to see if the enemy was going to try to mount any other assaults. Being on the perimeter, looking through the binoculars, see if we could see any movement. If there was any movement we would fire at it. If we thought we discovered a pocket of the enemy we would fire at that. We had the M-72 LAWs (light anti-tank weapon). We’d throw out some LAWs every now and then to that area. I’m sorry, not LAWs but the M-79 grenade launchers. They’d go boop! Boop! Launch off a few of those M-79 grenade launchers out in an area if we suspected there was a clump of enemy out there. Daylight was coming. It was getting lighter. We could now see more effectively and things came to an end and soon there was no more gunfire. It was the end of an incredible experience. We all, I’m sure, were thinking our own thoughts and thanking whoever we wanted to thank that we were still alive and walking and we began to assess the situation. We were flooded immediately, which I still resent to this day—we were flooded immediately with requests from colonels and lieutenant colonels and everybody else to come in to Dak Seang and pick up souvenirs so they could share in the battle.

LC: Like what?

RK: Oh, like captured weapons or anything. It was distressing because we’re trying to account for the dead and the wounded. We’re trying to organize ourselves into patrols to go out beyond the wire and see. By now it’s nine, ten, ten o’clock, maybe eleven in the morning on Sunday the nineteenth. We’re trying to find if there’s any enemy alive out there or conduct sort of cloverleaf patrols close in. Find out if anything
is still out there that had to be, you know, killed and Captain Chiles was the busy on the
dog gone radio with all these people wanting to come down. To me they interrupted
what we had to do or had been trained to do to make sure that we were going to continue
to be safe.

LC: To secure the area.
RK: To secure the area. Exactly.
LC: They were asking to come down so essentially for trophy hunting?
RK: Yeah. I think so. I think it’s fair to say that and sad to say at the same time,
but not all of their motives were as dastardly as that. I know that they had determined
that they would give us what they called combat impact awards and we had to hurriedly
write up all these recommendations for citations for all of us, which I felt was very self-
serving.

LC: Within how long after?
RK: Oh, three hours, four.
LC: Wow.
RK: You know, within three or four hours after this I’m sitting behind a
typewriter trying to remember what Dilley had done so I can type up his award of the
Silver Star. I recommended him for Distinguished Service Cross and they bumped it
down to a Silver Star. Recommending all of us for other awards, including having to sit
at a typewriter and recommend your own self for an award which I—all I did in my mind
was do what I was told and do what I had been trained to do, not to get some sort of
medal to pin on, but no they had to do that.

LC: This was being driven by the chain of command?
RK: This was being driven by higher headquarters. Yeah. I cannot recall that
Captain Chiles—and I know that myself and Lieutenant Sapp had nothing to do with it. I
don’t think that Captain Chiles was the type of man who would have indulged in that. So
it had to have come from the B team or the C team and maybe even out of Nha Trang. I
don’t recall.

LC: I mean, this is really quite bizarre to think that, you know, within the space
of—
RK: Oh, it goes further because within five or six hours we had an awards ceremony and we all stood there and they pinned medals on our chests.

LC: Now, this is in A Camp?

RK: Yeah. This was right in the A Camp. They flew a helicopter in. I can’t remember now who it was. It may have been a full colonel, certainly a lieutenant colonel, from the C team and a little bit of entourage that goes along with that. Here they come wop, wop, wop with the helicopters and they land and we all pop to attention and they pin medals on our chests. Then they fly off into the sunset. I just didn’t like the whole idea of it. Certainly, I mean, I suppose all these years later I’m grateful for the fact that they acknowledged our heroism collectively and the fact that we lived through it, but I’ll bet you if our camp had been overrun and we’d all been dead there wouldn’t be a hell of a lot of publicity about that.

LC: No medals.

RK: No medals. But because we repelled the enemy—and I still believe this in my heart to this day—because we repelled the enemy with only two Americans wounded and only four Montagnards killed, while we killed and captured a third of that enemy regiment—we killed and captured two hundred of them—that we didn’t make the papers. We didn’t make the headlines. Now, in all of the research I did to prepare to teach my class on Vietnam here at the college I only ran across one book that even mentions the battle that I was in and it’s a small book. It’s titled *Green Berets in Action*. It’s a little paperback. I can’t recall the publisher right now, but there tucked away in about a paragraph in the middle of the book is a small story about A-245 Dak Seang. I mean, Dak To was overrun and all the Americans were killed. Other Special Forces camps get overrun and everybody gets killed or, you know, emergency evac’ed out and so forth. There’s a hell of a lot of publicity about that. All we get is these little impact medals which they certainly could have waited a day or two or three if they want to give us medals. For crying out loud, let us do our job and then come down later, pin these medals on our chest, but nonetheless. I’m speaking out of bitterness there ‘cause I just didn’t like the idea. I was very happy when Sergeant Dilley got the Silver Star. I’m very happy that the other soldiers got their medals.

LC: Was the Silver Star awarded that day?
RK: Oh, yes. That day. It was pinned on him in the afternoon of Sunday, August nineteenth.

LC: Were you—I’m just thinking—

RK: Everybody else got Bronze Stars. I got a Bronze Star V. All the other Americans got Bronze Stars Vs. Dilley got a Silver Star, that very day.

LC: I’m just thinking about the scene here. You guys are probably, are you still wearing your cutoffs and stuff?

RK: No. By then we’d cleaned up a little bit.

LC: Okay. So there was a little rehab for you.

RK: A little decorum. Not much but a little.

LC: Well, there wasn’t a lot of time expired.

RK: No.

LC: What was your frame of mind as—

RK: Well, we hadn’t eaten. We hadn’t slept.

LC: Did you feel safe?

RK: No. I didn’t feel safe.

LC: I’m not sure that I would have.

RK: No. We had determined by then, because—maybe I should go back. In the aftermath of those Combat Skyspot bombs, which were to my remembrance they were 750 pounders. You know, you haven’t lived until you’ve had a 750-pound bomb go off about a football field length away from you. Holy Christ. The whole earth just jumps.

In the aftermath of that when the enemy broke and ran we were able to capture quite a few of them. As dawn was breaking we sent out some patrols immediately away from the wire and we captured a lot of the soldiers.

LC: Now, would Americans have gone on those patrols?

RK: Oh, yes. We were out there. I remember distinctly being on one of the patrols and—

LC: That had to be pretty hairy.

RK: Oh, it was hairy! Oh, yes it was hairy. Myself alone, the only American, because we only had six and we couldn’t afford to go out. We wanted three or four patrols out. We had to go out singly. I remember very specifically being out with about
a dozen Montagnards and we’re just creeping along and creeping along, trying to listen. We came across two North Vietnamese soldiers who were weaponless. They had no weapons. They were lying on the ground back to back and they had been bound together with wire and between them was a hand grenade. We all stopped and we backed away from it. I sent one of the Montagnards back to the camp, got one of the Vietnamese interpreters to come out, and we learned that these two soldiers in the aftermath of the bombing were just scared as hell and trying to run away and be safe. One of their superiors had stopped them and scolded them—well, a lot more than scolded them—and called them deserters and so forth and put a hand grenade between the two of them and tied them together, booby-trapped them. So that if either one of them moved significantly the hand grenade would go off and they would both die. So here are these two poor soldiers were just laying there terrified. We were able to determine, after we really looked at the situation, that the hand grenade was—the pin had not been pulled so it was just there. The other North Vietnamese officer or non-commissioned officer who had done this to the two soldiers had either forgotten to pull the pin or perhaps didn’t want to pull the pin and just left them there to worry it about as a form of punishment, psychological punishment perhaps for trying to desert the battle. So when we were able to see that the pin was still in the grenade then we went into the two men and untied them and took them back to the camp.

LC: Now, were you the one who sort of was able to visually establish this?

RK: Well, I can’t recall whether I first noticed it or one of the Montagnards first noticed it, but I do know that—yes, I did visually see it. So I saw that the pin was still in the grenade. Then I motioned and, of course, I had to lead because the Montagnards were waiting for me to do something. So then I went forward and began to untie the two soldiers while the other Montagnards kept rifles pointed at them.

LC: Bob, what would you say was their state?

RK: Oh, they were just terrified, Laura. They were just young kids. They were just young, terrified kids. They probably weren’t sixteen years old, maybe seventeen. I don’t know. Just scared beyond belief. Shivering, cold, in the early morning, hardly any clothes on, shorts and sandals—they were just terrified. All military intelligence aside, I mean, I knew instantly that the only thing those two soldiers needed to do was to get on a
helicopter, be sent back to another location where they could, yes, be interrogated by people who knew how to interrogate them, but to get some kind of aid. They weren’t wounded, not physically, but mentally they were just—I mean I’d never seen people tremble, like they were just shaking like aspen leaves in Colorado when the big breeze—they were just terrified. My heart just went out to them. Certainly they were the enemy and I was angry, but the human part of me said these kids are no threat to me. Christ, get them on a helicopter and get them out of here. So, yes, very early after the battle we tried to make ourselves feel safe by conducting these operations, an hour out, an hour in, half an hour—just walk around to see if there was anything there and each patrol would go a little bit further away from the barbed-wire areas and a little bit further out into the brush that surrounded the camp just trying to clean up the area. Then in the midst of all this here come these impact awards.

LC: Right. It’s quite bizarre.

RK: Yes.

LC: How would you organize—organize might be too clean a word, but how was the management of these, essentially, POWs that you were taking custody of in the instance you’ve described and others, were they being brought back to the camp and did you have a particular emplacement with Montagnards guarding them or how did you handle that?

RK: That’s actually a fairly accurate description of what we did. It was all ad hoc. We had no predetermined prisoner compound sort of building. We brought them back into the compound. If we thought—well, I can’t recall that we blindfolded them. It didn’t do much good to blindfold them. I can’t remember. Some may have been blindfolded, some of the—the Montagnards were very aggressive against them and I do remember that we had to very carefully make sure that the Montagnards weren’t just going to open fire on these guys.

LC: Where did that come from? I mean, can you say—?

RK: Oh, I think cultural differences. I think the oppression that the Montagnard people had felt in centuries of being, well centuries, but generations, of being culturally oppressed by the Vietnamese peoples. Then, yeah, like we talked about I think in a
previous interview, that was all part of this FULRO Movement and the hatred between
the Vietnamese and the Montagnards.

LC: Very deep seated.
RK: Yes. Very deep seated.
LC: You could see this now surfacing.
RK: Yes. Yes, but the Montagnards learned very quickly that this particular
group of American soldiers was not going to allow them to do anything like that to these
soldiers. They typically were brought back in. If we had something warm for them to
drink we’d give them some coffee or tea or water or something. I can’t recall that we
treated them any nicer than that. We certainly didn’t, you know, dress them up. If we
had blankets and we could see that they needed a blanket perhaps they’d get a blanket,
but they were just kept out in the open area seated down. We forced them to sit down
and squat, remain still and remain quiet. Then we just systematically called in the
helicopters and slicks to get them out.

LC: Would the slicks come to the airstrip or do you remember?
RK: To the airstrip. Yeah.
LC: Where, if you know, Bob, would they be going for interrogation purposes?
RK: Probably to Pleiku. I don’t remember that our B Team at Kontum had any
type of large-scale sophisticated intelligence network. My best guess is that they would
have been evac’ed down to Pleiku to the C Team location. One of the prisoners that we
captured was one of their psychological warfare operations officers. He began to spill his
guts quite a bit. That’s where we learned later on that it was the 101 Delta Regiment.
That’s where we learned that they had marched down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. We
learned from him that the troops in this regiment, all young, green troops, had been told
that our camp was virtually defenseless, that they would be able to overrun and capture
and kill all the Americans in our camp in just a matter of minutes. Then they were all
going to march triumphantly north along Highway 14 and attack the camp to our north,
Ben Het. None of that happened, of course, because we didn’t get annihilated.

LC: Right. Right. Now, did you find out about his statements then later through
the grapevine?
RK: Yes. Yeah.
LC: How did you find and locate the CPs that they had dug in the foxholes?

RK: Well, they were just—

LC: Just there?

RK: Yeah. I mean the holes were all over the ground. We were able to
determine that this particular hole was a one-man little cover and concealment spot to
hide in until the attack began.

LC: Did you actually walk down into the command posts that been dug?

RK: No. I never actually went down into one.

LC: I’m not sure that I’d want that duty, either.

RK: They were pretty primitive. I don’t want to paint a false picture.

LC: Right. We’re not talking about Cu Chi. We’re talking about overnight—

RK: No. These were just, like I said, approximately ten-by-ten and maybe about
five feet deep. There was no cover. It was just a place for them to be down below—

LC: Invisible, basically.

RK: Yeah. I guess the word is indefilade. They could be underneath, down
below the level of the ground and conduct their planning and communications and things
like that from there.

LC: Wow. Bob, if I can ask you about the —this is a question on tactics. When
you were describing the battle you were talking about the assaults that they were forming
up and then bringing at the ends of the camp. Can you sort of describe, if you have
words to do so and I’m sure this is pretty frightening stuff to think about, their advance?
Were they coming in groups and clumps or in lines or how did it look to you?

RK: Well, that’s a fair question. It was not reminiscent of a Chinese assault
perhaps during the Korean War era.

LC: Which we think of as like a human wave.

RK: Yeah. It was not the human-wave sort of frontal assault. It was more as you
describe, Laura, the clumps. That they were not on line marching abreast firing like
revolutionary soldiers. Small units running from bush to bush firing, making their way
toward the perimeter. Five or six men at a time here, five or six men at a time over there,
and that type of a thing. Although organized and certainly planned in that fashion it had
the appearance of a little bit of chaos because they weren’t simultaneously charging at the same time. Does that make any sense?
LC: Yeah. In some ways it forces you to look here and then look there and then look there.
RK: Yes. Yes. Dilley was able to pick up on this very quickly.
LC: Well, it sounds like it.
RK: Yeah. Each time he saw a movement he would just lay down a fire in that area and then another movement from another direction. If anybody could get that nickname John Wayne from this particular battle it would be Dilley because I know he just stood there fully exposed to the enemy fire with a machine gun in one hand propped up against the front of a bunker and a machine gun in the other hand propped up against the front and he just (machinegun noise) on one side and (machinegun noise) on the other side and back and forth. He would alternate without any regard for his own personal safety. (Editor’s note: Short portion of audio missing) Heroic action. Yes, and the rest of us were doing our jobs, too.
LC: Had you thought anything about the—let’s see, how shall I say this—how the other guys, the Green Berets that you were with up there, how they would perform or how you yourself might perform under these circumstances? Was it something that you thought about like when you’re drifting off because you’ve seen this movie three times? “God, if something happens I’m a little worried about that guy. I’m a little worried about me.” Did you ever sort of think about the guys in those terms before this episode?
RK: No. No. We had the utmost trust and camaraderie between one another. We were strangers to begin with. We were A team, members secondly and then we were U.S. soldiers, U.S. Green Beret soldiers, lastly and mostly. So whether one of us was a lieutenant from San Diego, California, who was twenty-one years old, twenty-two, or whether another was a sergeant first class who’d been in the Army for fourteen years and this was his second trip to Vietnam, at that moment we all just knew that we would be doing our jobs. Quite honestly, if anything perhaps the non-commissioned officers had reason to suspect the green lieutenants of being able to perform what they were supposed to be doing, but I think Joel Sapp and I did, we did our jobs that night.
LC: Let me ask you a little bit more about Sergeant Dilley. He’s the medic.
RK: He’s the medic.

LC: You did have a couple of guys wounded. Was he able to see to them after the heroism that he displayed at the line, essentially?

RK: Well, he was able to see to them even before that because both of them were injured and their wounds were very slight.

LC: They were injured in the mortar?

RK: They were injured during the mortar attack, yes. They were injured during the mortar attack. Gosh, I should remember his name but I can’t—had just a couple fragments of shrapnel in the back of his neck along the right side. Superficial wounds. A Band-Aid. A Band-Aid took care of him. What the heck was wrong with the other guy? Something similar to that. So yeah. In fact, both of those Americans, both of those Green Berets, they both took part in the entire battle, too, because their wounds did not—

LC: Didn’t inhibit them.

RK: No, not at all.

LC: They were in the action.

RK: Yes, yes.

LC: You mention, Bob, that he had some pills for you guys to take.

RK: Yeah. Yeah.

LC: Actually you mentioned that earlier, too, that when you would go out on these two-week excursions with your Montagnards that you had to make sure not to be sneezing and so forth. There were certain pills that you were taking for that. Was this something that you expected and knew? “Look, we’re going to pop a couple pills and we’re going to take these guys out.”

RK: No. This came as a surprise.

LC: I bet it worked, though. I mean, it sounds like—

RK: It did work. I mean, you can certainly imagine the level of adrenaline pumping in your body and the gunshots and—

LC: Only just barely.

RK: Yeah. That this is into that, and then here comes your team medic and he said, “Here take this!”

LC: You’re right. Okay!
RK: “Yeah. Okay!” So you throw it in your mouth, you grab a swig of water, and off you go. You’re just so hyped up from the excitement and then the K shot. I don’t think—I don’t remember when we finally went to sleep.

LC: You know that’s a question. Bob, what was the night of the nineteenth like?

RK: Pretty fitful. Pretty fitful. Yeah. We made sure that—we certainly made sure that the firebase to our north there at Nui Ek had plenty of ammunition. We made sure that they knew the situation in our area as much as we could tell them the situation. We had artillery batteries on alert in all the U.S. Special Forces camps that were within firing distance of us because we didn’t know what had happened to the—and that’s an interesting lead-in to what follows, Laura. We didn’t know what had happened to the other half of this regiment or the other two-thirds of the regiment.

LC: Right. You killed and captured a third.

RK: We were able to estimate I think reasonably good estimates that we killed and captured nearly a third of these people. Of course, as the weeks went by we constantly uncovered more bodies, which was not pleasant to talk about, decomposing out there in the hot sun. That led to other things as well but, yuck, that was gruesome. The remaining portion of this regiment, they went back to Hill 1219 to our west and dug themselves in on that hill. Now, we learned this because the 4th Infantry Division, which was to our south out of Dak To, they came up into the area in response to our attack and began to conduct American-style division-, company-, platoon-level combat operations in that area and met with tremendous resistance. They had a lot of casualties and KIAs (killed in action) in the Americans because these soldiers had retreated back up into that hill area, dug themselves in very well, and were fighting back fiercely. I know that it sounds biblical, but it was almost forty days before the remnants of that regiment were plummeted enough with enough heavy artillery and daily bombings from aircraft that they either were all killed or they just gave up and ran out of ammunition and went someplace else. I remember on one occasion a platoon of the 4th Infantry Division came into our A camp and they had just been decimated. They’d been dropped off in some sort of combat operation up there. Something had happened. They didn’t get the support they needed. These guys, they’d lost men in combat and they made their way to our A camp and we gave them the aid that we could give them and then we got them out of
there on helicopters back to their units, but it’s not a very good mark for the 4th Infantry Division. Something must have occurred. I certainly don’t want to speculate, but this young platoon of the 4th Infantry Division with their platoon leader, he was desperate for help from us. We got them, but the story here is that this enemy was persistent as hell. Although they’d lost this battle there they retreated to this mountainside, dug themselves in, and nearly every day we had artillery bombing the hillside. We had jet fighters bombing it with five-hundred-pound bombs and yet they kept mortaring us. We couldn’t get any American above camp, above ground I should say, for more than a couple minutes before one of them would lob in a mortar round.

LC: No kidding.

RK: Yeah. So we lived virtually like tunnels, like rats in our tunnels, for about forty days. The Montagnards—well, I’m making a long story out of an even longer one—but during the forty day period—it was kind of like a siege because we really couldn’t be above ground because somehow they had us spotted. They would creep up close enough with a 60-millimeter mortar or they’d lob in an 81 millimeter or I think they were called 82-millimeter mortars. Sometimes even larger weaponry. We did what we could. I remember one time being above ground in the team house typing out a pay roll and incoming mortars, you know. Two of our guys, in fact it was Dilley again and Combs was his name, another one of the guys. Combs, C-O-M-B-S. He was with Dilley and they come in. “Hey, sir, I think we—” I’m busy typing away. “We think we’ve seen one of these guys with the 60 mortar. Can we shoot the recoilless at him?” I said, “Sure. Go up.” So they crawled up into a tower. We had a 106-recoilless rifle mounted in one of the towers and they were going to shoot this 106-recoilless rifle at one of these poor little guys. If they’d hit him they would have knocked him from—but anyway I heard this blast which I thought was the backblast of the 106 and next thing I looked up above the sandbags and Dilley and Combs are running like hell across the compound. I looked out and an 60-millimeter mortar had gone off about ten feet outside my window, but I had been at such an angle that I was seated at my desk. When I heard the blast, of course, I hit the floor and all the shrapnel from the impact of the 60 mortar went into the sandbags or above the sandbags through the screen directly behind me. So I mean, again, I’m pretty lucky to have escaped through that. But the upshot of the whole story is,
Laura, was that these guys, they just stayed up in that hill and just they kept us underground. They kept us from getting resupplied—oh, there’s another good story to tell you here. Oh, my goodness.

LC: Well, don’t cut it short. Let’s hear it all. I mean, this is really amazing.

RK: Yeah. We had to be resupplied, of course, with ammunition and food, mail. The Montagnards had to be resupplied with cattle and the chickens that they got. So operations had to continue as normally as possible, but it was very dangerous because we lost a couple helicopters.

LC: Did you? Okay.

RK: Yes. Yeah. Because the enemy was so skillful. If we landed a helicopter in the same location twice, the second time it was nearly deadly for that particular helicopter. We constantly had to bring in the helicopters as deceitfully as we could from different directions, landing them in different locations, allowing them to only be on the ground, you know, an instant or three, and get out of there before incoming mortar rounds would hurt them, destroy them. Meanwhile, the Montagnards, they’re watching all this. The young boys, the Montagnard boys that weren’t the fighters, the little brothers, sons of the Montagnards—little kids, six, eight, seven, nine years old. They’d stand on top of their compounds and watch the helicopters come in and go out. Watch the helicopters come in and go out and you kept trying to tell them that this was dangerous. You know, when you hear the helicopter that means the mortars might fall so be underground. These kids they’d go out in the jungle and get teak wood and they’d carve replicas of helicopters from blocks of teak and present them to us as gifts. They had little men with the propellers would move and little men with the sticks and they were so skillful in making these things.

LC: Amazing!

RK: Oh, yeah. It was amazing. Well, here’s the other thing. This is August 1969, ’68.

LC: Sixty-eight.

RK: If you will remember this is the same time that John Wayne made a movie called *The Green Beret*.

LC: He had to because they had the song already so they had to have a movie.
RK: They had to have a movie. We had a radio—now I swear, if I’m lying I am dying. We had a radio message, an urgent radio message, saying that a helicopter was coming in to our location with an important package. So we got on the frequency with the helicopter that was coming in. Now, Laura, I swear, they had a Huey slick, pilot, co-pilot, probably two door gunners, and maybe one other guy flying with this package so that’s two, four, five Americans. That slick was escorted by two Cobras flying escort. That’s four. So a minimum of nine Americans involved in bringing us this package and we had no idea what the hell this package was, but God it must be important.

LC: Hell, yeah.

RK: So here comes this slick coming in right off the deck. I mean, he’s flying, he’s going a 110 knots and he’s flying as low as he can. They pop up. They make a left. They come right across the top of our compound. They get low as they can—all three of these birds—and they throw this package off to us. Guess what? A copy of John Wayne’s movie, *The Green Beret*, sent to us during this period of siege, perhaps to boost our morale.

LC: This is unbelievable. I mean really. I’m thinking through that movie and I’m thinking, “Oh, my God. You guys must have just been like ready to pop a cork.

RK: I watched that movie sitting down in the commo bunker with the other members of the team laughing our asses off at the absurdity of this movie and the fact that in the opening scene of the movie we knew the guys in the war. They were all our colleagues at Ft. Bragg. Hell, we knew these guys.

LC: Oh, you’re not recognizing them. Are you serious?

RK: Yes!

LC: Oh, my God.

RK: The guy who played the captain on the walkout team was actually a major whose name was Chapman at Ft. Bragg.

LC: Oh, my God.

RK: “There’s Major Chapman!” We’re just—we’re roaring with laughter. They risked the lives of these men to bring us this stupid-ass movie and there we were watching it just roaring. Now, did it raise our morale? It sure made us laugh. (Laughs)

LC: Yeah, I believe it.
RK: Then to watch the nature of the battles that they had, you know, and the
dialogue between them and, oh God, it was just hilarious.

LC: But you know, if you think about it, too, and you were watching it in a
particular situation which governed every response you could have to it, but if you think
about it, too, one of the reasons that movie has some legs, as they say, continues to be
watched, is because those scenes of battle between the United States forces in a fixed
position and communist forces—I suppose they were probably portraying NVA but I’m
not totally sure. In the film the sense was that, “Gosh, this was actually pretty realistic.
Wow. God, Vietnam’s a frightening place. There’s bad things happening over there.”
So that movie has some credibility, I think, because of the fight scenes, but yet you guys
were there just howling.

RK: Oh, yeah. We’re just roaring with laughter because we had just been
through this battle, we’re under siege, and here comes this movie about the Green Berets.

LC: About you.

RK: Yeah. Okay. Laura, can I interrupt for just a moment?

LC: Oh, sure.

LC: Well, Bob, did you guys see anything in the movie that looked right?

RK: No. Short answer. No. The depiction of the A team was accurate and,
yeah, but gosh who was the guy who played the newspaper reporter?

LC: Oh, David Jansen.

RK: David-damn-Jansen.

LC: Pulled that out from the back of beyond.

RK: Yeah. Oh, golly yeah, his role, but it was just one of the things that made
that whole period of time so interesting.

LC: Kind of surreal in a way. It’s important that we record this because there
was communication with the outside world. Somebody clearly thought it was pretty darn
important that that film get out there to you guys.

RK: Yeah. Yeah. I never met that person.

LC: Not sure who, some psy-war guy who thought, “Here’s what we’ll do.” Did
you feel, as you thought about it during this time period, I mean, you guys are under
constant stress and you know that 4th Division men are up there and they’re taking
casualties and so on. Did you wonder about an enemy that could take thirty percent
casualties on a first engagement and still dig in and hold on in the way they did?
RK: Yes. Yes. Yeah. That’s an accurate perception on your part. I couldn’t
help but be amazed that these soldiers could still be up there in those hills after the
pounding that they took and yet somehow be able to lob mortar rounds at us. Now, they
never again staged a ground assault. They just—then we never knew exactly if they left
or if they’d all been killed, either. That intelligence never came back to us, but as you
said, as you indicated, the fact that they persisted and they persisted for what seemed like
an awfully long time in their ability to alter the way we went about doing our business in
the A Camp. I mean, we didn’t send out patrols. We just stayed hunkered down and
tried to protect ourselves from the mortar rounds. It was always during the day. They
never fired at us at night. So our daily activities of maintenance, patrolling the
perimeters, all of that stuff was dramatically affected. Like you said, I couldn’t help but
wonder at the ability of these guys to still be there. I remember thinking, how deep can
they be dug in? I mean, hell, how big are these bunkers these guys are living in up there?
LC: Right. Because as you said—and I just want to underscore for this for
effect—you said that you remembered essentially daily aerial bombing as well as
artillery.
RK: Oh, yes. Yes.
LC: You could hear all this happening.
RK: Oh, yeah. In fact, we could direct it, if we wanted to, from our camp. We
could see the jets coming in and bombing the hillsides. There would always be an Air
Force forward air controller, the FAC. He’d be flying in the area and he’d be directing
the jet fighters in and out. There were some days where they’d have five or six sorties
against the enemy up in those hills. You get pounded five or six times a day by 500-
pound bombs—
LC: That would rattle your cage.
RK: Yeah.
LC: You’d think so.
RK: Yet they stayed there.
LC: And were also, it sounds like, returning. They had enough of an offensive
presence that you had to be concerned. Let me ask about the helicopters. You’ve talked
about how you tried to help organize these runs, supply runs, so that they would come in
at different angles, different pitches, and they were doing kind of touch-and-go supply
drop-offs, but you did have helicopters damaged in the process?
RK: That’s right. We had—I remember specifically that we did lose one
helicopter. One helicopter did sustain a direct hit and the crew was killed.
LC: Really? Oh, gee.
RK: Then, of course, another rescue operation was launched to get to the site of
that crash and retrieve the bodies of those Americans and get them out.
LC: That had to be pretty demoralizing.
RK: Yes it was because the helicopter pilots were flying resupply to us, and
ammunition. They were Medevac’ing the Montagnards who were ill or sick or who had
been wounded from the mortar fire because they wouldn’t be smart enough to get down
under cover. We probably sustained more casualties. None of the Americans ever, but
we had more Montagnards wounded as a result of shrapnel from incoming mortar rounds
after this big battle than we did during the big battle because they just wouldn’t
understand the fact that a helicopter meant mortars because to them a helicopter meant
fun. Helicopter meant resupply—
LC: Right. Goodies.
RK: Or food or anything.
LC: Good stuff comes off helicopters.
RK: Good stuff comes off helicopters. We couldn’t convince them of the danger
involved there. So what we would do as the helicopters approached our camp, three of us
Americans would move out into the compound or as close outside the compound and yet
still within the protective wires of some of the concertina and defensive positions that we
had. Each of us would have a different color smoke. As the helicopter approached all
three of us would pop smoke, a different color, and then whoever was in charge that
particular day would tell the helicopter—the helicopter would say, “I see red smoke. I
see blue smoke. I see green smoke.” Someone would say, “Green smoke,” and then the
helicopter would land at the green smoke.
LC: Can you tell me why you did it that way?
RK: Well, that way, see the enemy didn’t know. The enemy would see three
puffs of smoke coming up off the ground and the enemy knew that smoke meant
helicopters and helicopters meant a target, but they didn’t know which of those three the
helicopter would be at. So by popping as many as three smokes we were hoping that we
would confuse the enemy enough or spread thin enough the enemy’s ability to fire
mortars at all three positions.
LC: Prevent them from keying in before the helicopter actually arrived?
RK: Yeah. Correct. Now, the moment we popped smoke I’m sure the enemy
was ready to fire at any of the three, but we were hoping that they would not be ready to
fire at all of the three.
LC: I see. So this is some poker that you’re playing here.
RK: Well, yeah. What’s the game where you have the peanut hidden under the
shells and you move the shells around?
RK: Yeah. We were just trying to outguess the enemy. We never had a
helicopter land in the same place two times in a row nor did we ever have a helicopter
land according to the same color smoke two times in a row.
LC: Did you think that the enemy might be monitoring radio communications?
RK: I never had that sense. No. They may have been, but I certainly I never got
the sense and none of our radio-telephone operators ever conveyed that to me.
LC: Can you tell me about the reaction in the camp when you guys learned that
there had been a shoot down of the helicopter, of one of the supply helicopters? I don’t
know whether it was indeed a supply helicopter or evac. You hadn’t mentioned that.
RK: We were certainly saddened to learn that an American crew had been lost
bringing supplies to us. At the same time it was taken kind of matter-of-factly that this is
part of what’s bound to happen if you get enough birds coming in and out on a regular
basis sooner or later the percentages are going to catch up and the enemy’s going to get
lucky and knock one down one time. We sent out a patrol to guard the helicopter, but
Jimmy Chiles was adamant here. He said, “Don’t get involved. This is the air rescue
people. This is the—” what am I trying to say—the outfit of the helicopter. It doesn’t matter, but—

LC: Well, like this is the squadron’s mission?
RK: Yeah. The squadron’s mission to recover the bodies. The squadron’s mission to—it’s our mission to secure the area so you guys get out there, establish a perimeter around the helicopter, and keep those people, keep the bodies safe and protected until they come in to get them out. Of course, that was only a matter of hours, you know. But it was demoralizing.

LC: Yeah. I can only imagine. As you were going through these forty days, let’s say, did you have a sense that you guys were connected to the rest of the operation or did you have a feeling that you were kind of sitting there waiting for something else bad to happen with the occasional mortar rounds coming in and people, it sounds like, were taking shrapnel at least on a couple of occasions? I mean, you’re sitting in this camp that came real close to—

RK: I think there was a sense of isolation, a sense of separateness. We were not conducting operations as normal, as I recall. The combat operations, they took on an entirely different type of atmosphere. We didn’t, to my memory, engage in the long fourteen- or fifteen-day patrols. We didn’t want to get eighty Montagnards above ground and exposed. We were unsure of the strength of the enemy in the hills and not getting a hell of a lot of information from higher headquarters about what was going on.

LC: Yeah. I was gonna ask.
RK: I think there was a sense of disconnect, but at the same time we had a sense that this was part of the process involved in the aftermath of such a sustained, enlarged ground assault as part of the things that had to happen to clean up the, clean up the mess, and to purge the area of all the enemy soldiers, if that makes any sense. We were well connected to the B team and the C team. We were well connected to the camps to our north and south, as well. We didn’t feel like we were just there by ourselves with no support at all, but at the same time there was a feeling of, “Well what is going to happen next? Will this come to an end and how will it come to an end?” Then suddenly one day it did. I mean, suddenly one day we had a confidence, not by any revelation that the enemy had left, not by any revelation that they’d all been killed, but suddenly there was
this feeling of okay, things are normal again. Then we began to try to reestablish the
normal routine of our A camp life and cycles. I can’t recall now how it was determined
that Hill 1219 had been evacuated or that everybody there was dead. I never went to Hill
1219 so I certainly can’t speak from any first hand experience there. I don’t think any of
our other team members ever were on 1219. They may have been there before the battle,
before I even arrived at the Special Forces camp.

LC: Right. Not while you were there.

RK: Not while I was there, and certainly not after the battle.

LC: It was 4th Division Infantry guys who were actually going up into the area.

RK: Yeah. They were on the ground up there much more than we were, that’s
for sure.

LC: What did it look like when you were able to reestablish the routines? Can
you give me a guesstimate as to when this would have been? Are we talking about
October or something?

RK: Well, probably be talking—let’s see. The eighteenth of August, eighteenth
September, we’re probably talking about the latter half of September, early October,
when quote-quote “life returned to normal at the A camp” and other things had been
happening also. People came and went. New team members came in. Sergeant Dilley
was reassigned. He went home to America. We got a new team medic in. Jakovenko
came in as the medic. Not Jakovenko. Jakovenko was a heavy weapons man. Oh, I
can’t remember this guy. Maybe it’ll come to me later. [His name was Charles
Challela.] A new medic. Captain Chiles got a new job at the C team. I was about to get
another job at Mike Force.

LC: How did you find out about that change that was coming up for you?

RK: Well, I suppose you could say I pulled a real boner, but I did. Let’s see. Let
me backwards because I left Vietnam in, would have been June, I suppose, of ’69. So
let’s go backwards. Probably February, March, April—probably February, March—I’m
sorry. It had to be maybe March or February-March of ’69. Maybe I’m a little off there.
I don’t even know if it’s in my interview questionnaire I sent in. Captain Chiles got a job
down at the C team. He’d had enough perhaps of A team life and he got a job down in
the operations office of the C team in Pleiku. I felt at that time that I was gonna be the A
team commander, and I certainly felt that I deserved to be the A team commander. However, Jimmy Chiles told the B team commander—and I’m sure he did it out of loyalty and he did it out of concern, and as we talked about in the last interview, I mean I was hardly a saint. So he must have recommended to the B team commander that Kreger not be given command of this particular A team. So when I found out that another lieutenant was coming to A-245 to assume command of the team who had less time in Vietnam than I had time on combat operations, I became incensed. It was my belief, perhaps false, that the NCOs on the team wanted me to be the team commander. I felt I had earned it. I felt I had the skill to do it, but at the same time as I looked back over these years I must also agree that my behavior was certainly questionable at times with the alcohol and all the stuff that we did. Was probably enough of a doggone good reason that Captain Chiles had to say to his superior, the colonel, “You can’t give this command to Kreger.” That is something that I do regret. I regret that my behavior may have been responsible for me not becoming the team commander.

LC: Why did you want that opportunity? Did you see it as an opportunity or as something you were entitled to?

RK: I saw it as a tremendous honor and a privilege to be able to lead, to be an A team commander and to lead these wonderful Special Forces soldiers in their operations. It certainly wasn’t something I aspired to at the beginning but when I realized that the potential was there, yeah. I mean, I didn’t want it for myself. Maybe that’s not fair to say. I mean, I certainly wanted it for myself, but I wanted it for myself for what I thought were really good reasons because it would be an honor to be the commander of these men.

LC: Yeah. You’re thinking in the context of the men that—

RK: The men that we’ve been through this battle with and the new men in to the camp who had worked so hard. The whole atmosphere of being in that situation with these men and having shared so much with them, to be elevated to the position where I was their commander, it would have just been the greatest thing, but it didn’t happen. It didn’t happen. I’ve nobody to blame, probably, but myself for that. I kick myself in the butt for that every now and then.

LC: When did you find out that you weren’t going to get this assignment?
RK: Well, I found out when Colonel Marquee, the B Team commander, got on the radio and told me. I’m a first lieutenant and he’s a lieutenant colonel. Now you know who’s going to win this fight. (Laughs)

LC: Yes sir. Yes.

RK: Right? I didn’t think I was going to lose. I got back on the radio and I said, “You know, sir.” I said, “Two things are going to happen.” I’m a piss ant first lieutenant talking to a lieutenant colonel.

LC: Sure, but you’re a Green Beret and you’re gonna—

RK: Yeah. (Both laugh) I said, “You know, sir, two things are going to happen here. Either I’m going to be the CO of this team or I ain’t gonna be on this team.” That was it.

LC: Buh-bye. 

RK: Bye bye! Adios, papa mia. Well, I do remember now because this happened in January. This happened in January. I heard the press to talk button on the radio come down and there was a pause and he said, “Bag and baggage to the Mike Force, ninth of January.” That was it. So I was sent to the Kontum Mike Force. 

LC: Bob, if you could, just to fill in a listener who might not get the Mike Force structure and what its design was, can you just go into that for just a sec?

RK: Sure. Perhaps, I don’t—how are we doing on time here for today?

LC: We’ll probably wrap it up after maybe just a real quick kind of peek at what a Mike Force unit looked like.

RK: Okay. And then perhaps when we—

LC: We’ll resume.

RK: We’ll resume with Mike Force next time ‘cause that was an exciting part of first year.

LC: I can well believe it. How was it different from the A Team—A, B, C structure that you outlined earlier?

RK: Mike Forces were—it’s an acronym, M-I-K-E. They were Mobile Indigenous something, something. I can’t recall, but a Mike Force would be organized as a battalion of Montagnards, typically about three-hundred Montagnard soldiers, at the B team or C team level. Now, not every B team had a Mike Force attached to it to my
remembrance, but the Mike Force units, which were a part of SOG (Studies and Observations Group). They were a part of the Special Operations Group. They were under a different command structure. They operated differently from A camps, B camps and C camps. Assigned to each Mike Force battalion would be a group of American Green Beret soldiers. The soldiers operated—I mean the Americans operated as the commanders of these units. I don’t believe there were any Vietnamese officers associated with the Mike Force. It was the Montagnard soldiers and the American Green Beret soldiers. The mission of the Mike Force was varied, but most often they were called upon to conduct combat operations in specific areas under the operational control of other American units to be airlifted into hostile situations. They acted as a reaction force in support of other American outfits, whether it was an American company or perhaps an American Special Forces camp.

LC: When they might have contact with the enemy?
RK: Yes, or they would operate routinely under what was called the operational control of other American units. For example, the Kontum Mike Force that I was assigned to for the last part of my first tour was under the operational control of the 173rd Airborne Brigade. So our Mike Force battalion broken down into its companies, we did what the 173rd told us to do.

LC: So you were like their secret weapon in a way?
RK: Well, I don’t think we’re too secret, but we were, yeah, we were part of their strategy in confronting the enemy.

LC: Okay, Bob. Well, let’s take a break there and we can resume and hear what happened as you got started with the Mike Force next time. Okay?
RK: Wonderful.
LC: Okay.
Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. I’m continuing the oral history interview with Dr. Robert Kreger. I’m in Lubbock and Bob is speaking from California. He’s in his office, I think, at Cerritos College and let me just double check. Today’s date is February the ninth, 2006. Bob we were talking last time about the sort of end days that you spent at the A camp in October 1968—I’m sorry, in late 1968 and that you were in early 1969 reassigned. Can you tell me something about how that happened?

Robert Kreger: Well, good morning, Laura, once again and thank you. It’s a pleasure to resume our discussions here in our interview. Well, after about seven-and-a-half, eight months or so, as the executive officer of the A team it came to pass that the team commander, Jimmy Chiles, was reassigned to Pleiku as part of the operations staff at the C team level. I presumed, wrongly, I presumed that I would become the team commander and was looking forward to that. I think I had the support of the NCOs, although I can’t be sure of that. The B team commander, Colonel Marquee was his name, he was a lieutenant colonel. He sent someone up to the A camp to become the team commander who was junior to me in time and grade, both being first lieutenants. In fact, of course, as an old hard core veteran by then I took one look at the greenness of his fatigues and realized he was brand new and my fatigues were, you know, faded and worn and I was a veteran. So I took offense with that and got on the single-side band radio and told Colonel Marquee in no uncertain terms—you know, a first lieutenant arguing with a lieutenant colonel—the outcome of that. So I said, “Look, sir.” I said, “Either I’m going to be the CO of this team or I’m not going to be on it.” A few second went by and then I could hear the pause, the press-to-talk button go down on the radio, and he said, “Bag and baggage to the Kontum Mike Force by the ninth of January.” So that was my reassignment orders. I overstepped my boundaries. I guess I let my pride get in the way of good judgment and I backed him into a corner, which I shouldn’t have done certainly. He just responded by reassigning me. I don’t think he had any malice in mind for me at
the time. He was probably just reacting to my being bullheaded and saying, “Well, this
lieutenant wants to be this way then I’m just going to reassign him to the Mike Force.”

LC: Which he must have known had need of—

RK: Well, yes. At that time Mike Force, the Mike Force organization, this
highly-trained group of Montagnard soldiers, they were just building a Mike Force in
Kontum at the time. So there was clearly a need for officers. There was clearly a need in
fact perhaps even for experienced officers, if I can call myself experienced officer at the
time.

LC: Well, based on what you’ve said, yes.

RK: Once I got there and got into the Mike Force operation I felt very
comfortable with my assignment. It was a bit harrowing at times, no doubt, but once I
got there and saw what the Mike Force was trying to do in Kontum, again, I became quite
comfortable with it. I enjoyed the assignment and looked forward to interacting with the
Montagnards on a different level than I had at the A team. So the B team, which was B-
24 based out of Kontum, as I said they were just beginning to develop a Mike Force. As
I recall there was a captain who was assigned to the Mike Force and for the life of me
I’ve tried to remember his name, but I can’t. He was a short timer. He was getting ready
to DEROS and go back to America and. You know, again, my memory is sketchy here,
but I’m convinced that he must have had non-commissioned officers as part of the
Americans assigned there, but I just don’t remember. All I know was that once I got in
there and I met this new captain, who would have been my commander at the time, he
indicated to me that he was short time enough that he wasn’t going to go out on too many
combat operations and that fell to me. So I began immediately to get right back into the
thick of things pretty quickly. At the same time we were conducting convoys from
Kontum along I think it might have been Highway 14 from Kontum to the coastline near
Qui Nhon where we were recruiting more Montagnards and bringing them back by
truckloads to join and become part of the Mike Force in Kontum. So my duties as the
only other officer at the Mike Force in Kontum at that time, my duties included
conducting these convoys back and forth to Qui Nhon and picking up Montagnard
soldiers who had been recruited by other Special Forces people in the Qui Nhon area.
We didn’t actually go down there and beat the bushes and try to find them. That had already been done. We just had to go pick them up and bring them back to Kontum.

LC: These, Bob, these were Montagnards?

RK: Yeah, these were Montagnards. These were Montagnard soldiers, yes.

LC: Any idea what they had been doing down in the coastal area?

RK: No. I don’t. I really don’t know what.

LC: Interesting. Okay. So that was—

RK: So that was one of my primary duties. Of course, the administration of paperwork and things like that that always falls to the executive officer, and then conducting combat operations. That’s what I did for the last four months or so, well, the last part of my tour of the first year. Yes. That was pretty interesting. I enjoyed it.

LC: Well, let’s talk about the convoys first, if you don’t mind. Well, actually, now that I think about it, can you talk first about the setup of the Mike Force at Kontum? Where exactly were you located? Did you have your own camp?

RK: Well, we were located right near the—gosh, in fact we were juxtaposed or adjacent to the B-24 compound. So if you can imagine a Special Forces compound B team-level, oh I don’t know how large, Laura, to give you a size for scale to compare here on the phone. Maybe the size of half of a football field. Offices, mess hall, quarters to sleep in, things like that because the B team was an administrative organization. Then next to it would be the headquarters building of the Kontum Mike Force and the sleeping quarters for the officers and enlisted men and sleeping quarters of the Montagnard soldiers.

LC: Were these above—was everything—?

RK: Yeah. It was all above ground. This was all above ground, yeah.

LC: How permanent are we talking about in terms of the structures?

RK: Very permanent. Yes. Cinder block, wood construction—built to stay there, yes. Nothing temporary about it. It was from there that the combat operations were conducted.

LC: People who were familiar with the Kontum area know that there was an airstrip there and it was actually the junction of several French colonial-era road routes up
through the Central Highlands. Where was the compound in relation, for example, to the main airstrip at Kontum? Do you know?

RK: Oh, wow. Gosh. That’s an interesting question. I can’t recall, but it had to have been relatively close because my—and that’s kind of a good segue there because my combat operations involved being airlifted either by fixed-wing aircraft, C-130, C-123, usually C-123s, or airlifted by helicopter from the airstrip over to the coastline near Qui Nhon once again, not far at all from the Marble Mountain area where we conducted our combat operations. I can’t recall that the logistics of moving the men and equipment from the Mike Force compound to the airstrip was ever any big shakes. We just did it as a matter of course. So I’m thinking that it was probably very close. Yeah.

LC: Who would have, do you remember who had security responsibility for the airstrip there?

RK: Was it the 4th Infantry Division?

LC: That could be. That could be.

RK: I know that it was—yeah, the security of Kontum city and the surrounding urban part of Kontum was not in the hands of Special Forces.

LC: But it was U.S. Army?

RK: Oh, it was U.S. Army. Yeah, probably the 4th Infantry Division. There are some interesting stories there, too.

LC: Well, go ahead and unreel a couple of those if you want to.

RK: Oh, gosh, well. Gosh, how can I say it? Well, the combat operations were very different than what we had done on the A team. We were always under the operational control—I shouldn’t say always—typically under the operational control of a larger American unit. In my case, I often times fell under the operational control of 173rd Airborne Brigade. So wherever the 173rd was operating and whenever or wherever they needed help, then a Mike Force company would be dispatched to go help them or we would be dispatched and land in their area of operation and conduct separate patrols and separate sort of combat operations within their AO (area of operations) and be ready to respond to any difficulty that they might have. So the B-24 Mike Force that I was a part of was primarily sort of like a reaction unit. We conducted operations that lasted twenty or more days. We would be airlifted into these areas, again, either by fixed-wing or
helicopters. We would get our orders from the 173rd Airborne Brigade and the operations
sections of those organizations and essentially just do what we were told. If ever there
was an occasion where an American unit was in trouble, pinned down by enemy forces,
or needed extra manpower for any reason then we would get a radio message to be at a
certain LZ (landing zone) at a certain time and we’d get airlifted out of there by
helicopter and we’d come in and join in the fighting behind them. So it wasn’t
uncommon at all to be out in the field for twenty days or so and be in combat most of that
time of one sort or the other. I remember one combat operation lasted nearly twenty-five
days and we were in enemy contact about twenty days out of twenty-five days. So it was
pretty intense. Now, we never suffered any great casualties. I don’t know why. I guess
we were just lucky, but there was always a sense of apprehension—what are we going to
do next? Here we are patrolling in this particular area. The terrain is flat. It’s rice
paddies. You can see the mountains off in the distance. Suddenly you get a radio
message that there’s a company of Americans in trouble over here. You get airlifted up
and the next thing you know you’re in the mountains. Then a few days later you might
be back in the rice paddies and back and forth we went. The commander of the 173rd at
that time was Herbert, Colonel Herbert. “Iceberg” Herbert. What a treat it was for me,
and I guess I’m name dropping, but what a treat it was for me to work for this man. He
will in my view always be a fine Army officer and I haven’t kept up with his career after
his Army days, but I do know that he got—how can I say it—he was drummed out of the
Army? Is that the—I don’t know. Maybe I’m not being entirely factual here but, of
course, I’d been out of the Army for a while, but he was one of the first as I understand it
to make public the fact that American soldiers were committing atrocities against
Vietnamese and/or other soldiers of any sort and reported some of these things his own
men had done and. For that I think it cost him his brigadier general star and I think it cost
him his Army career, but he was a marvelous man to work for and although I never met
him personally—well, actually I shouldn’t say that. I did meet him one time and that was
a wonderful story too. No, sorry, I mustn’t fib. I don’t think I ever met him personally
but his major, the S-3 operations officer. One time I was out in the field with my
Montagnards and it was hotter than blazes, well over a hundred degrees. My troops were
exhausted and we’d been wandering around in the rice paddies for days it seemed like. I
got on the radio and I requested permission to black jack the troops. That was just kind
of a code name for “Can we just take a break? Can we just sit down and relax for a day
or so and cool our heels?” So I’m on the radio saying this is so and so requesting
permission to black jack the troops and all of a sudden I heard this break, break, break, 
break, break. Here comes Colonel Herbert’s voice and his call sign was Iceberg—and
there’s a story behind that, of course, too. Apparently when Colonel Herbert was a
captain in the Korean War, now maybe these things can be verified from other sources.

LC: Sure. This is interesting.

RK: You know how rumor has it in the Army, but apparently when he was a
captain in the Korean Conflict he had been wounded, to some extent I do not know, and
brought back to the rear area for his medical attention. As a stubborn gung ho captain as
most of us were he got treated for whatever the wounds were and insisted on going back
to his unit. Apparently at night in the winter of Korea he left the hospital or aid station or
something and wound up walking behind a deuce-and-a-half truck in the direction that he
thought he was moving back toward the frontlines where his unit was and walked through
the night behind this two-and-a-half truck and was picking icicles off the tailgate of the
two-and-a-half-ton truck to drink water from the icicles. As daylight came he discovered
that what he’d been sucking on was ice cubes or icicles made of blood and the truck was
carrying wounded and dead not in the direction of the front, but back toward more
medical aid to the rear. So from that he gets the name Iceberg and I don’t know whether
that’s fact or fiction, but I’d like to think it’s fact.

LC: Hell of a story.

RK: Hell of a story. Well, anyway so here comes break, break, break, break, 
break. He says, “This is Iceberg Six. I’ve been monitoring your radio. I’m in my
Charlie Charlie ship. I’m flying around. How’d you like some refreshment on the
ground? Permission granted. You can black jack the troops. How’d you like some
refreshment?” I said, “Hey, that’d be wonderful!” So out of nowhere comes a Huey
slick and getting out of the slick is the major S-3 who was his operations officer and then
a high-ranking NCO. He might have been an E-8, E-9. I can’t recall right now. They’re
carrying a mermiter can full of chilled Paul Mason wine. Now I swear, Laura, if I’m lying
I’m dying. We sat in the middle of a rice paddy in this blazing hot sun. Myself and a
radio-telephone operator, I had an artillery officer with me and his RTO (radio-telephone operator), and this major and a couple other—five or six of us Americans sat around and drank five bottles of wine.

LC: Unbelievable.

RK: I hadn’t had any alcohol, of course, in fifteen or so days. Man I got so blitzed so quickly. He says, “Well, I’ll see you later, boys.” The major gets on the helicopter and [helicopter sounds] he flies away. I turn to my Montagnard interpreter and I said, “Well let’s get up and get moving.” I walked about twenty feet and puked up my guts. I said, “This is where we’re going to sleep,” because I knew I couldn’t go anywhere. So we just made camp that night right there.

LC: Oh, my God. That’s wild.

RK: Oh, it was—Colonel Herbert always gave support. He told me one time, he said, “I’ve got a company on the berm,” and he always kept a company of American soldiers ready to react within a moment’s notice to any sort of hostility at all. If he told you that he had a company on the berm and you could call that company to give you aid if you needed it, you could count on it. One time we got into a fix and we were pinned down somewhat. We could still move a little bit.

LC: Now this is you and the Mike Force?

RK: Myself and my Montagnards, yes, along with, oh, I don’t know, three or four other American soldiers at the time because we would get artillery forward observers and artillery officers and their aid to come with us to help with fire direction for artillery support if we needed it. So we’re on patrol and we’re walking around minding our own business and suddenly we start picking up some enemy fire from across a pretty large area of rice paddies in a tree line to the opposite side of that. Well, we’re hunkered down and we think we’re pinned down, although we were kind of trying to assess the situation. I got on the radio and I was calling back to 173rd Operations Center and giving them a situation report. All of a sudden here comes this voice again, “Would you like a company of Americans on the ground?” I said, “Well, sure I’d like a company of Americans on the ground.” I’m telling you, it wasn’t fifteen, twenty minutes when we heard the first helicopters coming in to our location and Cobras came screaming in and [Cobra sounds] with the Cobras coming flying lead. Behind the Cobras here come four
slicks flying in formation. American troops are piling out of these slicks and all of a
sudden we were in control of the situation once again. It was just—I don’t know, the
feeling I had, of having that kind of support and being able to know that it wasn’t going
to get screwed up. If Colonel Herbert said that he had your back, you could bet your ass
he had your back and it was tremendous. We really enjoyed it. We really enjoyed it.

LC: Well, psychologically for you as the person who was essentially leading the
combat operations, this had to be huge.

RK: Oh, yes. Yeah.

LC: I mean, in part you’re there already to reinforce operations happening in the
AO somewhere. That’s why the Mike Force has been called in, but to know that if you
make contact you’re going to have support in twenty minutes, if your guys can hold on,
no matter what you stumble into. That’s huge I would’ve thought.

RK: Yeah, it was very reassuring.

LC: Oh, my gosh. Wow.

RK: Like I said, sometimes as you know conducting the interview, sometimes
fact and fiction get a little fanciful after all these years, but I remember feeling that I
really enjoyed working for Herbert and knowing that here was a professional Army
officer who was dedicated to his men and organized and forceful. If he said something
was going to happen, it damn well was going to happen. It gave you confidence when
you were in the field. It gave me confidence as commander of my Montagnards to be
able to advise and assist the Montagnards knowing that we were going to be all right one
way or the other.

LC: Bob, you mentioned that he later was one of the, essentially, the whistle
blowers who talked about atrocities having been committed. How did you find that out?

RK: I found that out certainly well after the fact.

LC: Yes.

RK: Let me see if I can put a timetable on it. I got out in 1972. It would have
been probably, oh gosh, maybe between 1975 to 1980, in that time frame somewhere in
there.

LC: This would have been through media reports?

RK: I’m sorry?
LC: Through media reports?
RK: Yes. I heard about it through media reports. Whether it was radio or television or newspaper I can’t recall, but I did read or hear somehow that he had gotten into trouble for telling the truth.
LC: That’s what happens sometimes.
RK: Yeah.
LC: What was his first name, do you know?
RK: No, I really don’t know.
LC: He was a colonel when you were—
RK: He was a lieutenant colonel.
LC: Lieutenant colonel, okay.
RK: He was brigade commander of 173rd and that would have been, gosh, it would’ve been January to about July or so of 1969.
LC: Wow. Well, he sounds like somebody special.
RK: Yeah. He’s one of the men I would like to meet someday and just shake hands and swap stories with.
LC: I bet. Yes, sir. Bob, let me ask about the command structure. When Mike Force would be pulled out and inserted into the area of operations of, say, the 173rd what would be the line of reporting for you?
RK: The line of reporting for me directly went to the 173rd. Now, Mike Force was a part of SOG, which was the—oh, God. Let me see. SOG acronym.
LC: Special Operations Group?
RK: Special Operations Group, and there was a—oh, boy. To be honest with you, this was all part of somewhat of a mystery to me because when Colonel Marquee assigned me to the Kontum Mike Force, I didn’t know what the Mike Force was. I can’t recall that any representative of SOG ever directly came to me and said, “You’re now a member of SOG by virtue of the fact that you’re assigned to the Mike Force. Here’s how we do things in SOG.” Now, I do know—and it was a mysterious group and to me still remains a bit of a mysterious group. I understand there was a C&C (command and control) North and a C&C Central and a C&C South, a Command and Control for SOG and divided. So we were probably a part of C&C Central, maybe. I don’t even know
where their headquarters was. It might have even been in Kontum, but I don’t recall that
during the combat operation that I was responsible for reporting to SOG. I mean, they
must have known of our operations obviously because we were a part of their group, but I
was, as a soldier operating in the field, I was first responsible to whoever I was
OPCON’ed (operational control) to and that was the 173rd.

LC: Okay. Tell me about the Montagnards that were in your unit.

RK: Oh, incredible. Incredible.

LC: Yeah, tell me about this, Bob, and how you developed your relationships
with these guys.

RK: Well, they were some of the finest soldiers that I’ve ever associated myself
with. They were dedicated young men, motivated. I don’t know what other adjectives to
use to describe them. They were physically fit. They were enjoyable to be with. They
laughed and they joked and they fought hard and they played hard. They had loyalty to
the Americans. Boy, they were just dedicated soldiers. Now, underlying that dedication
was probably a very real sense of nationalism and pride in their own ethnic group as
Montagnards. I still don’t think that the Mike Force Montagnards had any intense love of
the Vietnamese Army or the Vietnamese people and what they had done historically to
the Montagnard people as an ethnic group.

LC: Quite the contrary. Yeah.

RK: But I do know that, of course, they were paid very well by us and they were
equipped superbly. I mean, I remember one young man and the dedication. We were on
combat operation, Laura, and in fact it was part of the same operation where we got the
support from Colonel Herbert’s company. We were, if you can—I don’t know try to
visualize, we were on line. We were making an assault, if you will, sort of a frontal
assault on this village where we had received some fire from. One of my Montagnard
soldiers who was unusually tall for a Montagnard—he might have been 5’7” or so. He
was a hulky sort of kid. I mean, this guy was a, he was a good-looking young man,
strong as an ox. He carried an M-60 machinegun with about two-hundred rounds of
ammunition strapped across his chest like Poncho Villa. He must have visualized himself
almost like a John Wayne-esque figure. He was unstoppable. So we’re on line in a
fashion trying to move toward this tree line where we got the fire from. He’s standing up
right walking through the rice paddies just firing that machine gun almost holding it in one hand, an M-60 machine gun, while he’s feeding the ammunition through it with his other hand. I looked over to my left and I saw this guy doing this thing. I thought, “God, what strength does this young man have?” I’m doing the best I can to keep up with his fast pace and walk through this slushy, mushy, muddy rice paddy. He’s just walking through this thing like he was on a Sunday stroll firing this machinegun. Off to my right out of the corner of my eye I noticed an enemy soldier who was running away from us. I’m telling you, another one of my Montagnards took off on a dead run and chased this person. Now, he was carrying a carbine, an M-1 carbine. This Montagnard soldier, whose name I simply can’t recall, he chased this person literally down. The person got so frightened, the enemy soldier got so frightened, that he dove underwater into the rice paddy trying to avoid capture. This kid went underwater into the water and scrambled around and found this guy and pulled him up and beat him over the head with the stock of his carbine. My eyes were like silver dollars. Jesus, look at this. What the hell. He beat this person half to death. Well, it turned out it was a female.

LC: The NVA person?

RK: NVA medic that we had captured. This Montagnard soldier nearly beat this poor girl to death. I intervened and stopped it. We extracted from her as much information as we could at the moment and then got her Medevac’ed out of the area, but in his passion, in his perhaps hatred, I don’t know. Without any regard for his own safety this guy just took off running like you and I would run a hundred-meter dash. He just ran and ran and ran until the enemy soldier realized that I’m not going to outrun this guy I better try to hide, but that didn’t work either. So a couple stories just to illustrate. These Montagnard soldiers they were—we bonded with them. We bonded with them quickly and intensely unlike I had bonded with the Montagnards at the A Camp.

LC: Really?

RK: Oh, it was—

LC: This was different.

RK: It was different and it’s difficult to describe. I remember another quick story.

LC: That’s okay.
RK: It was in between operations and I was back at the B-24 compound and I was enjoying a movie and some bourbon and a bag of popcorn. I was watching the movie and one of my Montagnards came running over to me. His broken English and my broken Vietnamese Montagnard together he told me that one of the soldiers was ill and maybe he was dying and that I needed to run back to the compound immediately. So I jumped up from where I was and I ran back to our compound there, at the Mike Force, and went into the barracks where the Montagnard soldiers slept. Sure enough, here was one of my Montagnard soldiers on a bunk and he was in desperate states. I had had just enough medic training to become dangerous and thought I knew what I was going to be doing. So I jump up on this poor guy and I’m trying to find a pulse and I’m looking for breath. I start CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation) and I start mouth to mouth resuscitation. I’m massaging his chest and in between my massages and in between my breaths I instruct the Montagnards to get a jeep and get a litter. We’re going to take him across Kontum to the aid station of the 1st Brigade of the 4th Infantry Division. We’re going to take him over there to this aid station because maybe—and I honestly felt that—I’ve told this story to friends and students for years now. I honestly felt as if I had a pulse and I really felt in my heart that I was saving this boy’s life. So the Montagnards arrived with a litter. We put him on the litter. I walked alongside the litter, you know, giving him mouth to mouth. We carried him to a jeep, put him in a jeep. Now this was at night. This was, oh, I don’t know, between eight and midnight, somewhere in that kind of timeframe at night. We drove across Kontum at night into this aid station and all the while—it was about a forty-five-minute trip from start to finish. All the while I’m giving this young man mouth to mouth resuscitation in the thought that “Damn, I’m saving this kid’s life.” I didn’t think of it in a I’m sort of a hero here thing. I just felt I was doing a good thing for someone that I loved, someone who had been loyal to me and now I have a chance to return a favor, a big favor. So we’re going across and we carry this young man in to the aid station there at this aid station of the 4th Infantry Division. I swear, Laura, in retrospect it is a very comical and yet tragic thing all at the same time. We carried this kid in, put him down on a table of sorts. He was still on the old-fashioned Army litter with the canvas and the poles. An American doctor who was assigned to the brigade aid station there comes in and from about ten feet he looks and he says, “Hell,
that guy’s dead.” I said, “What?!” He said, “Yeah, he’s dead. Hell, look. I can see from
here the blood’s already settling in his back. How long has this guy been dead?” he says.
I said, “Hell, I don’t know! What do you mean he’s dead?” “He’s dead looking.” So the
doctor goes over there, you know, does his thing and, sure enough, he turns around and
he says, “Yeah, this guy’s dead. How long has he been dead?” I looked at the
Montagnards and the Montagnards looked at me and we didn’t know how long he’d been
dead. So I said, “I don’t know.” This American doctor looks at me and he says, “Well,
what’d you do to this guy?” I said, “What do you mean what did I do to this guy?” He
said, “What’d you do?” I said, “Well, I’ve been giving him mouth to mouth.” “Oh, Jesus
Christ,” the doctor says. “You’ve been giving him mouth to mouth resuscitation? Well,
we better figure out what this guy died from!” I said, “Well, okay.” I’m only about
thirty days from going home. I’m within thirty days of going back to America. Sure as
hell, they ran some tests on this guy and he died from tuberculosis. Holy God. So I get
this urgent message from the 4th Infantry Division that I have to report over to the aid
station. I go over to the aid station and they tell me that this guy’s died from TB
(tuberculosis) and I might not be able to go anywhere in thirty days. You got to get
tested. Oh, Jesus. You know those little TB tests that raise the little bubble on your arm?

LC: I sure do.

RK: They gave me nine of them. Three on my left forearm. I’m looking down
now at my left forearm. They gave me three of them in three little lines and the doctor
said, “If any of those things are positive you’re not going home.” “Oh, Goddamn,” I
said. You can’t do this to me! I mean, I’ve been in Vietnam for a year. I haven’t been
shot. I haven’t been fragged. I’m going to go home in forty days and now you tell me I
can’t go home because I got TB.” He said, “That’s it! If you get it you ain’t going
home.” So fortunately after the period of time none of them turned out positive.

LC: Well, that was a long few days I bet you watching those.

RK: Oh, gosh yes.

LC: I bet you had your arm in front of you the whole time.

RK: Of course, I didn’t know what to look for, but you’re right. I was, “Oh, God
what does it mean?” I tell that story to illustrate—how can I say it? Again, I don’t want
to make myself out to be some sort of superhero but there was this bond between the
Montagnards and the Americans and it was much more intense at the Mike Force because they were a different type of soldier. Again we relied on them and they relied on us and everybody understood that mutual bond that existed and you just respected it. If I had to do it I certainly would have done it all over again without a moment’s hesitation. It’s certainly sad that the young man died but—

LC: Of course. I mean, that’s just a very sad and very weird story, but it encapsulates so much about the relationship.

RK: Yeah. I can’t certainly again cannot speak for other Special Forces soldiers, but my view of the Montagnard people is of the utmost respect. I mean, the hardships that they endured. Of course, in all the years that have ensued since my time in Vietnam and my teaching now here at the college and my interest in cultural geography and these kinds of things. It brings me in touch with ethnic groups. I’ve had occasion to visit some of the Montagnard communities in Fresno, California. It’s sad and it’s good at the same time to see that their life does go on. It’s certainly not the life that they probably would have imagined for themselves here in America, but to know that some are here and some are doing well is encouraging to me.

LC: Bob, tell me a little bit about the community there in Fresno. What are your observations of it and do you have any friends there? Have you tried to cultivate that?

RK: No. There was a geography conference that took place in Fresno some years ago. I knew that there was a Hmong Montagnard community there. I took the opportunity to take my wife with me and together we drove up a couple days before the actual conference began and just visited. Went to the restaurants and although I don’t speak Montagnard we stopped the car and got out of the car and shook hands with people. The level of poverty was appalling at that time. Gosh, Laura, it’s been every bit of at least eight years. Hopefully in the past five or six or eight years or so things have changed for the better. Perhaps I am remiss in not going up and visiting again, but I was struck by the level of poverty that they lived in. It was kind of a throw back to a black urban ghetto of the ’60s. They were housed in apartment sort of complexes.

LC: Public housing kind of?

RK: Probably. Yeah. Very much like a public housing situation, although I can’t be sure that it was public housing, but it certainly had that physical appearance.
LC: That feel. Yeah.

RK: Yeah, the feel to it there. Of course, the Montagnards are a very family-oriented culture and so in any one apartment with two or three bedrooms you might have twenty people there. I was struck by the poverty level, the conditions under which they were living. I was struck by the crowdedness that I believe I was observing, but the same time there was a sense of hope. The young children, although they weren’t clothed immaculately and they weren’t washed and scrubbed like other children might have been in America at the time, they had smiles on their faces. They were outgoing and friendly. They were trying to learn English.

LC: Sort of like you remember? The same kind of métier?

RK: Yeah. The same passion for life, the same hope for the future, but now they find themselves in a different land and learning new languages and learning new customs, but they seemed to be undaunted. They seemed to think—I got a sense that they would be successful. I don’t know at that time if any of their—well, the school-aged children were in American schools and learning English, of course, and other American subjects—American subjects—school subjects.

LC: What you mean is as taught to American students and of course these kids will grow up with that American identity as well as their own.

RK: Yeah. Even to this day when I introduce myself to my students at the beginning of a semester and I’m reading a roster, if I come across a Vietnamese name I mean I want to know a little bit more about them and I always ask their history. I don’t try to get too personal with them. I say, “Of course, it’s up to you, but how long have you been in America? Was your mother or father a boat person? Can you tell me a little bit about your experience?”

LC: Do you do this in the class situation so that other kids can kind of—?

RK: Oh, yeah. I make it a purpose to have my other students understand that other people their age, their colleagues, their contemporaries inside a college classroom in Norwalk, California, have come from a different background.

LC: Completely different.

RK: Who have a family history that is unlike your family history. In fact, one of our maintenance—well he’s not a maintenance worker—he’s one of the most important
people on campus because he helps repair a lot of technical equipment, is a Vietnamese man. He and I have a wonderful friendship and we smile at each other whenever we see each other on campus. A couple of years ago he went back to visit his family in Vietnam and he remembered me. He brought back a souvenir for me of Vietnam. I’m holding it in my hand right now. It’s a model that some young person in Vietnam made. It’s a model of an airplane and it’s all made from spent shell cartridges. There’s an ink pen. It’s got a little holder in the back of it in the tail section. There’s an ink pen that’s made out of old bullets. There’s a NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) bullet, 7.62, and I’m pushing—it’s an ink pen. It actually works. I’m just drawing with it now on my desk pad there and the front part of it is a cigarette lighter, but I felt very honored that Norm would remember me when he was visiting his family and bring me back something from Vietnam.

LC: Yeah. That speaks volumes. Bob, let me ask you a couple more questions while we have a few more minutes. Going back to the incident that you described with the young Montagnard man. He’s advancing either toward a village or a line that was clearly held by the enemy and suddenly this NVA person got up and started running away. As it turned out you said she was a woman, but was she in NVA uniform?

RK: Yes. Yes, she was.

LC: Can you tell me about what happened once she was subdued? Who would speak to her? You had Montagnards with you. Were they fluent in Vietnamese?

RK: We had interpreters with us who were fluent in Vietnamese so when the person was subdued very quickly—when I saw what was happening that an enemy soldier was running, that part of my Montagnard force was running after her led by this one kid, I quickly picked up the command element of my company, my scout, my interpreter, and perhaps the radio-telephone operator. I made it a point to become a part of that.

LC: Get over there.

RK: To get over there, find out, because well, for several reasons. As it turned out it was good that I was there, of course, but it was essential that if we did capture this person that that person remain alive for intelligence reasons. There was another lesson that I learned working with—well, of course, on my second tour of duty with the
Americans as well as the Montagnards. Well, it’s a long story. I’ll give it later on in other interviews. I don’t want to get too far ahead, Laura. It became very clear to me, especially in my second tour that I was not prepared to interrogate prisoners. I didn’t have the training, certainly, to know what types of questions to ask. I certainly didn’t speak the language fluently enough to ask questions. I was smart enough to know that if I told my interpreter to ask a particular question that question may or may not be asked. So I always knew that the smartest thing I could do as an American officer, regardless of who I worked for, if we captured somebody was to get them out of there as quickly as possible to a trained professional who could interrogate them. Having said that, it was also vital that we get there if we can capture any documents or anything like that. So with all of that rushing through my mind, I join in the pursuit of this woman. Of course, it was so far away at the time I didn’t realize it was a woman. We get there. The Montagnard is beating her over the head with the stock of his rifle.

LC: So really cracked her good.

RK: Oh, yeah. He nearly fractured her skull. I mean, he was just whooping on her. I intervened. I forcibly took the rifle from him and stopped the assault and began to try to extract information from her.

LC: Through your interpreter?

RK: Through the interpreter.

LC: Who was an ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) or what was—?

RK: He was—oh, boy—

LC: I don’t want to slow you down. I’m just trying to—

RK: No. He would have been—yeah, he would have probably been ARVN.

Yeah. He would’ve probably been ARVN because I don’t remember that he was one of the Kit Carson Scouts. I did work with the Kit Carson Scouts as a rifle company commander in my next tour but I don’t think I ever got exposed to those Kit Carson Scouts as a member of SOG, if you will, as a member of the Mike Force. No. It became apparent very quickly that this woman was not gonna reveal any information because she was a pretty hard-core NVA. We were able to find out that she was an E-6 or some type of a sergeant medic. She was carrying a satchel with medical supplies in it, and she was unarmed. She didn’t have a rifle. Why she was out there somewhat separated from the
other part of this enemy force I don’t know. Perhaps she may have been attending to
someone and heard the Americans coming up or heard the Montagnards coming up on
her and started to run.

LC: What made you guys think that she was hard-core NVA?
RK: Oh, just her attitude. Oh, boy.
LC: Can you describe it?
RK: Well, she was—how can I describe it in a politically correct way? Was she
butch? If she was a woman she was half-a-man, I’m telling you that. This woman could
have whooped up on most of us. She was a tough, tough nut and she survived this
beating with some injury. She wasn’t bleeding from her head but, boy, she had been
knocked around a bunch. She had just run probably a quarter of a mile to try to elude us.
She had dove into the water to try to hide under water holding her breath until the
Montagnard found her and pulled her up out of the water. It was something right out of a
Hollywood movie, for crying out loud. Yet she didn’t seem to be physically fatigued.
She didn’t seem to be frightened at all.

LC: Did she just stare back at you?
RK: Oh. She stared back at us and spit and cussed and maintained a sense of
NVA pride and professionalism. She was not going to divulge anything to us. The
Montagnards were trying to torture her.

LC: By doing—? Can you say?
RK: Well, yeah. They were lighting cigarettes and trying to put cigarettes on her
skin. They were lighting cigarettes and trying to put cigarettes up her vagina. I kept
saying, “No, no, no. We’re not going to do this.” The Montagnard commander was
getting involved. He wanted to torture the hell out of this poor woman. It was all that I
could do as an American officer to keep them from really hurting this woman. I had no
particular love of this woman by no means.

LC: Yes, understood.
RK: But I didn’t see any sense in hurting her because you’re damned sure not
going to get any useful information from her I didn’t think at the time. I did my very best
to keep the abuse to a minimum, although it did happen. I was saddened by that, but it
came to pass maybe thirty minutes, maybe an hour, after her capture that the
Montagnards came to realize somehow, perhaps through their commander, that this was fruitless and the time had come to stop this and let the American do what the American wants to do by getting her on the helicopter and getting her out of there.

LC: Had you already called for a helicopter?

RK: Yes. Yeah. I had called for an evac as quickly as we could get one on the ground.

LC: For a Medevac specifically?

RK: No. Not for a Medevac, just a command-and-control ship. Anybody or anybody who was flying around that could take a prisoner out.

LC: Get a POW (prisoner of war) out. Did you see her onto the aircraft then, Bob?

RK: Yes. Yeah. I made sure she got on the aircraft.

LC: Do you know where she would have been taken?

RK: No. I don’t. We were on the coast. She might have gone into a coastal city like Qui Nhon. She might have been flown back to Kontum, but I honestly don’t know. Now, at that point, see, at that point, she was under American Army control. In fact, I don’t even know whether it was 173rd. It may have been a 173rd ship that came and got her out, but I mean that experience, Laura, has served to reinforce in me the futility of trying to field interrogate these prisoners, especially a hard-core NVA sergeant who just happened to be female. I mean, and the fact that she was female, of course, sadly as I look back, the fact that she wasfemale opened her up, so to speak, to a lot more abuse by the Montagnard soldiers because they took out a lot of frustration on her. Again I did my best to minimize it, but I wasn’t able to stop all of it. I just wanted to keep her alive, if it makes any sense, and I regret that. When I look back on all of my experiences I mean that’s one of the things that when I do think about it I say to myself perhaps I could’ve done more. Perhaps I could’ve been more forceful and put myself in between the Montagnards and her. I didn’t at the time. I don’t know that I would now but I think, God, Bob, in the name of humanity, in the name of all these other things which we consider to be good and valuable, is there something that perhaps you could have done to minimize the torture that this woman’s going through? But, you know, it’s a tough call. I certainly respected her although she was an enemy. Cigarette after cigarette she wasn’t
talking. She wasn’t gonna tell you anything more than what she wanted to say and all she said was that she was NVA and she was a medic and she was a sergeant. That was it.

LC: Did she say her name?

RK: No, not that I remember. She never divulged other enemy in the area which, of course, is what we were after. Where are your friends? How many of there are you? Where are you, those kinds of things.

LC: Right. Nothing.

RK: Nothing. Nothing. So as I said after this period of time the nothingness finally got through to the Montagnard who was in charge. Of course, I’m in a tenuous position, too, because I’m there as an “advisor” quote-quote. In the strictest sense of the word I’m not the commander. So I mean I had to walk a fine line between taking complete charge of the situation and denying to the Montagnard commander his opportunity of command. I don’t know. Maybe I’m making more of a mountain out of a molehill than I need to here. I felt somewhat powerless at the time to stop what was going on and yet I felt an obligation to try to become part of it and to intervene and to keep it to a minimum. I know I’ve said that several times here.

LC: Well, this was a very difficult situation all around.

RK: Yes. Yeah, it was. You know, again for me the legacy of it was we didn’t learn a damn thing. Despite all those efforts we didn’t learn anything more than we knew other than the fact that she was a sergeant and a medic.

LC: This is certainly interesting both from a historical point of view, a little saddening, but also speaks to contemporary issues. I know you’re paying attention to, as am I. We have a great national debate effectively going on right now about whether our troops should use torture to extract information under certain circumstances.

RK: When these things are made light, made to light, come to light in the media, I just tell my friends and my family members who ask me about these things I say, “Look, this is not new. This is not something that’s new.”

LC: Sadly, that is true.

RK: Yeah.

LC: Yeah. Let’s take a break there, Bob.

RK: Okay.
Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Dr. Robert Kreger. Today is the fourteenth of February 2006. I’m in Lubbock and Bob is speaking by telephone from California. Bob, thank you very much again for your time. I want to ask a little bit about the conclusion of your first tour. Were you keeping track of the dates?

Robert Kreger: Oh, indeed.

LC: I figured you might have been.

RK: Yeah. I certainly had a short timer’s calendar going and the pucker factor was pretty high. We remember from our last conversation that I had gone through that scare with the tuberculosis of the Montagnard soldier in the Mike Force and was certainly relieved to find out that I wasn’t TB-positive.

LC: That took how many days for them to make that determination?

RK: Oh, that was about three days or so before all the testing was read and everything was confirmed to be negative. After that, of course, I was sent out on one more combat operation and I was very apprehensive about that, but nonetheless I was commanded to do so. So I went out one more time with the Montagnards.

LC: For a period of how long?

RK: For a period of about twenty days.

LC: Okay. So a typical—

RK: Huh?

LC: A very typical of your operating.

RK: Yes, very typical of the operations in the Mike Force, but just prior to my DEROS. So as I often tell my colleagues and friends here at the college on that last combat operation you couldn’t drive a ten-penny nail up my ass with a two-pound sledge hammer. I was not gonna do anything stupid because I had one goal in mind and that was to go home to my wife and my child and come back to the world, I suppose, and resume whatever type of life was awaiting for me back in America. I had already agreed to extend my USAR (United States Army Reserve) commission. So I was anticipating
being promoted to captain and was anxious about that. The last combat operation was relatively uneventful. We just, you know, a walk through the jungles and a walk through the rice paddies. I can’t recall this morning if we had any intense combat situations, just a rather routine operation. When that was concluded I went about the business of preparing myself to go home. As I left Vietnam the first time, of course, I was forward looking. I wasn’t backward looking too much that I can remember. At that time I wasn’t full of memories of the good and the bad of the first year. I was really looking forward to coming home and settling back in. I knew that I had a son that I hadn’t seen. Well, I did see him on R & R (rest and recuperation) in Hawaii, but that was just briefly and he was just a toddler, I mean an infant. So I was anxious and, of course, I missed my wife and wanted to reconnect with her. When I compare my leaving to the leaving of other GIs, it was probably just a routine trip home.

LC: Did you have any anxiety for your comrades there, the Montagnards, or other people that you had met and made connections with?

RK: Yeah. I mean, yeah. I think that was—I can generalize, but I think that most GIs did think and care about the fellow GIs that they were leaving behind and knew that they were in a precarious situation and hoped for the best for them. I don’t recall that we were all full of tears and embracing and hugging and all that kind of stuff as I left. It was just a gentlemanly sort of goodbye and we’ll try to keep in touch sort of situation. It was just kind of—like I said, I don’t mean to be too repetitive here—but to me it was just routine. I was just going home and taking up where I left off. So that kind of brings—and the politics of it, at the time, the middle of 1969, things were still pretty hot and heavy and I knew that the conflict would continue. I didn’t know then, of course, the circumstances on how that I would return to Vietnam for my second tour but I could pretty much anticipate coming back again, although it wasn’t a conscious thought at that time. The only thing I was looking forward to was coming home.

LC: Yeah, I’ll bet. I can believe it. Getting a shower maybe, getting some regular food.


LC: I’ll bet. Things like that. Yeah.

RK: Yeah.
LC: So this would have been June of 1969?
RK: This would have been June of 1969, yes. About June or July 1969.
LC: Can you tell me about arriving home and what your impressions were and how things went?
RK: Well, it was a wonderful experience but it was mixed. I'm not going to pull any punches and I haven’t and I won’t. My wife had been a very independent and strong woman and had been raising a child by herself. I had been off playing soldier so we did have some difficult readjustments to go through. There were times when it was rugged. I recall one particular incident that—well, how can I say? The flight back was routine. Everything was fine. I arrived at Fayetteville, North Carolina, where Barbara was living. Actually she was in Durham, North Carolina. In my absence she had taken up a duplex apartment in Durham, North Carolina, near where her family was. In anticipation of my return, she hired—she was a registered nurse working in a hospital. She hired one of the orderlies on the floor who was an African-American young man, a very polite young man. I don’t remember that I ever met him, but I know that she talked about him after the fact. She hired this African-American young man to come in to the duplex and strip the floors and polish and wax the floors and get the apartment all spiffed up and nice and clean for the arrival of her husband. Not long after I had been home, I don’t know, maybe a day, maybe less than a day, but very shortly after I arrived home a phone call came to the house and it was very threatening to Barbara. I could tell by her reaction that she was taken aback by this phone call. So I pressed her about it and pressed her about it until she reluctantly told me that during the time that the young man was in the house—it was a Saturday morning probably about a week or so before I arrived back. He was inside with his buffers and his pails and his mops and all the cleaning equipment. She got a phone call from the KKK (Ku Klux Klan) telling her to get that nigger out of her house because they were watching her and they knew that she’d been shacking up with this nigger while the husband was in Vietnam. If she didn’t get that nigger out of the house there’d be trouble and she might get hurt and further that they would tell the husband when the husband came back. Complicating matters—well, actually the smartest thing that my wife did, bless her heart, was to telephone the police immediately after the phone call. She hung up. She telephoned the police saying to them that she just received a
threatening phone call. I don’t know to what degree they sloughed it off or did not slough it off. Apparently after the young man left the house, probably around noon on that Saturday, here comes a gun-toting KKK guy to the house and—how can I say it—he just starts waving this pistol around and threatening her and backed her up against the brick veneer of the duplex and was starting to really harass her. At this point the sheriff drove by and put an end to that, but to me in the way Barbara related the story it was evident that the police knew who the man was as they exchanged—I don’t know that the word greetings is the right way. Something like, “Hey, Tom, knock that off,” or something like that. Then the police drove away and the man left. Well, of course, I became enraged and I insisted that Barbara tell me who this man was because I was going to go after him with all my might, filled with my own bravado about what had just happened to my wife.

LC: I believe it. I believe it. Yep. Not necessarily about you but I mean I just—this is really, really bad. You come back in a situation and—

RK: Yeah. But she never did. To her credit she knew that if it got any worse than what it already was then there might be more consequences. So she just encouraged me to put it aside and put it aside and she kept hammering that with me for a few days. Not long after that we moved out to Fayetteville so that I could report back to my duty station there at Ft. Bragg.

LC: Do we know anything about the young man? Did he come after him?

RK: Well no, not to my knowledge. All I know is that when Barbara did speak to me about him she always spoke of him—they were co-workers. They were friends.

They were colleagues. She spoke of him in wonderful terms. I don’t know that he was ever approached by anybody like that.

LC: Well, that’s pretty scary.

RK: But yeah. I did. I put it away as best I could and reported to Ft. Bragg for my next duty station.

LC: Bob, what assignment did you draw?

RK: I went right back to the same company that I left before my first trip. I went right back in Bravo Company of the 7th Special Forces group there at Ft. Bragg. I was assigned as the B team commander, brand new spanky captain. I was a B team
commander for—I can’t remember the number of the B team—but it was a pretty nice
assignment. The B team that I was in charge of, the commander of, we were responsible
for putting on what was known then as the Gabriel Demonstrations.

LC: Okay. How do you spell that?
RK: Just like the boy’s name, Gabriel. I believe it was named in honor of a
Special Forces soldier who had been killed in Vietnam. I can’t be sure of that. But this
was kind of an exciting time in my life. Again, there were good things and bad things
that happened and I don’t know to what extent we want to go into all of those here with
this particular part of the interview.

LC: Well, whatever you care to share, Bob, that will help us understand.
RK: The Gabriel Demonstrations were—I mean, I don’t know any of the history
of how they came about, but they were designed to showcase Special Forces soldiers to
the public and to other militaries around the world. So a typical workday would be the B
team NCOs and officers each had their own respective jobs. Located on Smoke Bomb
Hill was an area that was dedicated to presenting the Gabriel Demonstrations. So you’d
have your morning formations. You’d have your morning BS and your morning coffee
and breakfast and things, and then everybody would—those who were participating in the
Gabriel Demonstrations would go down to the site and practice Monday through
Thursdays. Then on Fridays you would present to visiting VIPs, literally from all over
the world, the Gabriel Demonstration. It consisted of an A team walk-on demonstration,
hand-to-hand combat demonstrations, HALO (high altitude low opening) jumps
occasionally. If we could get in a HALO jump we’d do a HALO jump. We had scuba
demonstration. Well, we didn’t have a scuba demonstration. We didn’t have water, but
we would have the scuba equipment laid out. The VIPs, both public and military, if you
remember John Wayne’s movie The Green Berets, our Gabriel Demonstrations started in
the same way with people sitting in the audience in a bleacher setup. Then there would
be an A team walk-on. Then we would break them down into groups and they would
walk through this area much like you’d visit a living history sort of setup or you’d go
watch somebody do this and then you and your group would go to the next station. There
would be a Special Forces soldier who would explain how a Viet Cong village might be
set up or you’d go to the next and there’d be a Special Forces soldier who would
demonstrate rappelling techniques. We did rappelling for them as well. So it was the Army’s way, the Special Forces school’s way, of presenting to the public the skills, the capability, the professionalism of the Green Beret soldier. Certainly to some extent there was politics involved as well as propaganda involved because we wanted to present to the public an image that the Special Forces soldiers were not necessarily mercenaries and bad people, that we were highly-trained professional soldiers who had these kinds of skills. Here were the types of skills that we had and here are some of the ways in which we use these skills. So I was very honored to be the B team commander.

LC: Yeah. This is actually quite a big deal. This is an important position.

RK: Oh, I remember many times in addition to the Gabriel Demonstrations—there were people from Washington routinely. I don’t know whether they were senators or congressmen or whoever, but they were big shots coming in. In addition to this, at the JFK Center we would conduct from time to time an indoor walk-on A team demonstration. I remember one time giving a presentation to the commander of the Japanese ground forces. I mean, this was the highest-ranking military officer in the nation of Japan and he was sitting in the audience. Here’s this tiny little captain, Bob Kreger, giving him a briefing. That was pretty powerful stuff at the time.

LC: Yes. Absolutely.

RK: So it was quite an honor and we also—and here’s where it gets fun and it gets personally—well it’s fun and it’s revealing. As a part of this Gabriel Demonstration mission we would also travel to off-site locations to present these types of demonstrations. It was called the traveling demonstration team, so by virtue of the fact that I was the B team commander I became the commander of that team as well. So I got myself more skilled with hand-to-hand combat and I became the first officer that “Dirty” Jack Hughes would allow to be on his hand-to-hand combat team. He’d beat the crap out of me for about three weeks down there in the sawdust pits before he felt I was qualified.

LC: Now, can you tell me a little bit about him and his reputation?

RK: Well, “Dirty” Jack Hughes was an E-6. He was one of the best soldiers I can recall. He was a hard-drinking, hard-fighting NCO. He’d been in Vietnam, I think, two tours at the time. E-6, thin, wiry, he had learned his hand-to-hand combat skills in Okinawa and he taught us—there were six of us who made the team, who were on the
team. We traveled and presented these hand-to-hand combat demonstrations, in addition to doing A team walk-ons and HALO jumps and weapons demonstrations and all these different kinds of things. Gosh, here, Laura, I can talk for hours on this but—

LC: Well, it’s pretty cool. Yeah, whatever.

RK: Jack was just—he didn’t appreciate the fact that here was a young buck captain who wanted to break into his hand-to-hand combat team. He told me. He said, “When you’re down here in the sawdust pit there is no rank. You’re going to get beat up real bad.” I said, “Bring it on,” words to that effect and he did. I remember going home and just collapsing into a hot tub and soaking with Epsom salts for two hours before I could go to sleep night after night after night. Barbara would say to me, “Why are you doing this?” I’d say, “Well, it’s important. I want to do this.” Of course, the machismo aspect of it was captivating. To be considered a member of his hand-to-hand combat team for me personally was an achievement and, of course, at the same time, Laura, it—you get running with the wrong crowd. I don’t mean that in a bad way, but after your hand-to-hand combat practice all afternoon in the hot sun and getting beat up, rather than going home to your wife and child you go to a tavern and you drink and that leads to other things which are not good to marriages.

LC: Understood.

RK: So I fell into that pattern of behavior.

LC: Now, this is kind of what was standard operating to get into this group—how much of this did you have to do in a way?

RK: Yeah. At the end of a practice you simply couldn’t say to the guys, “Well, I’ll see you tomorrow.” You had to—and, of course, as an officer there was a fine line between drinking real hard with your mates and not drinking real hard with your mates. I didn’t do a very good job of separating that line. But nonetheless, as a member of the team I made the team and we had some wonderful guys on that traveling hand-to-hand combat team. There were six of us who always performed routinely, but if anybody was hurt or had to be missing that particular traveling trip someplace there would be a substitute who would come in. So we traveled around the Eastern seaboard of the United States presenting these shows at the request of the organization that was putting on a show.
LC: Now like who might do that?

RK: Well, for example, we were in—well, gosh, where can I start? The first one that has to jump out in my memory is Spiveys Corner, North Carolina.

LC: That sounds tiny.

RK: It is tiny. It is. Now, this was Fourth of July of 19—God, it might even have been ’69 or maybe it was—no, no, no. Wait a minute. It was either ’69 or ’70. It may have been ’70. We can verify this because we were invited to Spiveys Corner, North Carolina, during that Fourth of July celebration to participate in the first annual National Hollering Contest. If you remember Johnny Carson on the tonight program always would bring the winner of that contest on to his program.

LC: I do remember this.

RK: They would holler. Well, here we were, seventeen Green Berets up there, hot, drinking beer, summer Fourth of July weather, drinking beer and just getting snockered while we presented two hand-to-hand combat demonstration shows as well as our A team walk on presentation and other things. The hand-to-hand combat show that Jack had choreographed was probably one of the best that’s ever been presented to the public to show. We barely held back any punches and we used props like black jacks and brass knuckles and knives and all these different types of things. We presented to the public a mixture of street fighting and basic tae kwon do skills and Army hand-to-hand combat stuff. It was very realistic and it was very much appreciated. Well, anyway this was the beginning of my personal Woodstock. I just love telling this story because it reveals how I was changing. Here we were at this Spiveys Corner National Hollering Contest celebration. You know, seventeen rough-and-tumble, odey-collody, true blue, red-blooded American Green Berets. Into this setting late in the afternoon came some motorcycle bikers. I can’t remember the number of them now, but there was a large number of them that came in and immediately the hair on the back of our necks just went up. There was going to be a fight. There was no doubt about it. There was going to be a fight because here we were with our uniforms and our short hair and our medals and here come these, you know, Hell’s Angels rebels, the antithesis of what we thought we represented. We were there with our wives and children. It was a family deal. It was put on by Spiveys Corner, North Carolina, Chamber of Commerce, I suppose. Surprisingly,
Laura, as the afternoon wore on, as the beer continued to flow, these two groups of opposite types of people began to talk and we began to try to understand one another. I don’t know how it all evolved that way, but it just did. I had heard about Woodstock and I had understood what Woodstock represented to the American people and to the anti-war movement at that time, but I had never made a connection to that notion of nakedness, that notion of drugs, the notion of free love, and all those kinds of things. As that afternoon wore off I swear it was just a wonderful experience. Pretty soon afternoon turned into evening and the next thing you know at about two o’clock in the morning or so, and most of us had long since told our wives to go on home. We were staying and we were drinking with these guys. We all, the motorcyclists, the Green Berets with our families, those that were remaining, the members of the families of the bikers, we all got naked and crashed into a farmer’s pond and went skinny dipping.

LC: Are you serious? Wild.

RK: Absolutely. This was my Woodstock. This was my awakening. This was the time when I began to think that you shouldn’t always judge a book by its cover, that these guys and their wives and families were basically no different than we were. We wore different uniforms. We represented different things, but under the clothing in the raw we were all pretty much the same laughing and cavorting around in this guy’s pond at midnight or so raising hell, drunk as skunks, but it served to grow me up a little bit more. I was, gosh, twenty-three, twenty-four years old. It served to start my voyage toward independent thinking, toward thinking outside of the box that the Army had put me into as a commissioned officer. I’ll never forget that. It was just such a moment of epiphany for me that I thought, “God this is fun. This is fun.” Of course, it was very much different than anything I’d ever done before, but it was a wonderful experience. We traveled to Erie, Pennsylvania, to the Tenth Annual Erie County Air Show. We put on demonstrations for about a quarter-of-a-million people there. It was a wonderful experience. We went to Orangeburg, South Carolina, for the Twenty-Second Annual ROTC Appreciation Day at Orangeburg, South Carolina, State Teacher’s College. The student body at Orangeburg State Teacher’s College was about ten-thousand students and about 9,999 of them were African Americans.

LC: Yeah. It’s a historically black college.
RK: So here we are out in front of them, a mixture of black and white. I’m speaking Swahili in the A team walk-on to these guys and I could see their eyes getting as big as silver dollars. Here’s a white boy speaking Swahili. What the hell is he doing? Then we put on our hand-to-hand combat show and after the fact one of the young men came up to me and he says, “Boy you guys are tough. You should go beat that guy up over there.” They had some guy who came on after us who was performing karate. He was breaking bricks. He was breaking wood. He was very skilled and I’m being encouraged to go beat up on him. I said, “No, no, no. That guy’s out of my league. I’m going to let him do it.” Then that night they took us to their side of town and we partied with them. It was just wonderful. It was wonderful. So that’s what I did essentially for thirteen months as the member of this traveling demonstration team and the leader of the B Team. As I said, I guess I don’t want to dwell on this too much, but there’s one other story that really I remember so vividly about this trip, that time in my life. We were at Ft. Dix, New Jersey, for Armed Forces Day of 1970. We were there about two days before our scheduled performance and we had been practicing. Oh, gosh, there are so many stories, but I’m just going to stick with this one.

LC: I don’t know if I’m going to let you, but you can start this one. We’ll see how we go.

RK: We had been practicing. We had a couple of HALO jumpers who came in. The wind picked up on their practice jump and blew them into the bleachers. One man had suffered a broken ankle. One thing led to another and the members of my team were very anxious for the day of our performance to come by and we wanted to do our shows and, of course, then you know enjoy that and then go on home. The night before our schedule appearance the brigadier general, who was in charge of Ft. Dix at the time—I think he was the base commander, I can’t recall, but he came to me in our barracks where we were staying. He said, “Captain Kreger.” He said, “I’m afraid I’m going to have to cancel your show.” I said, “What? What do you mean you’re going to have to cancel our show?” Of course, immediately I became incensed because we had been practicing and we had this injury. We were ready to go. We were going to put on a really hell of a good show for the audience the following day. Here’s his explanation. He says, “Well, our intelligence tells us that Jane Fonda and a group of her anti-war hippie protesters are
going to be outside of our gates tomorrow to protest Armed Forces Day. We feel—” and
I can remember his words. “We feel we can handle her presence, but we don’t think we
could handle her presence if she knew that we had Green Berets on the base. So
therefore I’m going to have to cancel your show.” Oh, man. I just became livid. I was
incensed and I probably was not being a very good officer at the time. I don’t know how
overtly insubordinate I got with this brigadier general, but I know that I gave him a piece
of my mind.

LC: Like along what lines? Do you have any—?

RK: Well, what right did he have to cancel our show after we had practiced so
hard? It wasn’t Jane Fonda. I could care less about Jane Fonda. It just incensed me that
we would be cancelled because of this person’s presence, whoever the devil she was. I
didn’t know hell of a lot about her or what she was doing and could even care less quite
at the moment. So we just got very angry, the whole team did—well, I led the charge
with my anger I’m sure and some of the NCOs got swept in. So we commenced to get
pretty drunk that night, the whole team, as I remember. Most of us were pretty well
along. The following morning woke up and I said to the team, I said, “You know, let’s
go over and see if we can’t put on a show at McGuire Air Force Base.” They all agreed
that we could give it a shot. Ft. Dix and McGuire are side by side. So we loaded in this
little bus that they’d given us to drive around. We went over to McGuire. We got out. I
walked around and we were on the tarmac near one of the airstrips, runways. I remember
finding an Air Force person who looked like he was in charge. I introduced myself and
told him that I had a team of Green Berets who were ready to put on a show for his
audience and that we’d been shut out of Ft. Dix. We wanted to put on a show and would
he accommodate us. He said, “Why sure. Of course, we will.” He pointed out some
area on the tarmac where we could put our rubber mats down for our hand-to-hand
combat show. He allowed us to kind of rope that off a little bit and set up an area where
we could begin to warm up and practice for the show. He told us essentially what time
we would be doing our show. So at last the anger began to dissipate because now we
could at least perform for the audience, which we were. We were performers. We
enjoyed performing for them and especially doing the hand-to-hand combat show which
was really, as I said before—
LC: Something else.
RK: Something else.
LC: Yeah, it sounds like it.
RK: So as we began to warm up—now, we would warm up at about three-quarters speed. At one point in the show, myself and a young Green Beret soldier named Peter Crate, he was from Canada. I think he was an E-5. He and I did what was called a reverse hip throw. Essentially what happens is we square off face to face with one another and he attempts to hit me over the head with a billy club. I blocked the billy club with my left forearm and then I step into him and I pivot in front of him and throw him over my hips. Well, Jasper Marsh, who was master sergeant, he’s our narrator and he’s got a little bullhorn and he’s working the crowd like a carny barker. Boy I’m telling you. It was comical. “Ladies and Gentlemen here we go. We’re getting warmed up for this Green Beret show hand-to-hand combat. Come on, step around.” You know, just like a carnival barker. He was great. Jasper Marsh, never forget him, and he was whipping the crowd up into a frenzy. Peter and I came out to practice this reverse hip throw and he came in and I popped up my left hand and I broke his wrist. With that his wrist fell and the billy club hit me across the top of the head and cut the top of my head. Well, now the blood is dripping down the side of my head and I had hair at the time. I’m bald now. So the blood is starting to drip down through my hair onto my sideburns and Jasper Marsh is saying, “Look at this, ladies and gentlemen. Look at that captain out there, by God damn. This is just the warm up. You guys are really in store for a big treat. You got to stick around to see this show. Look he’s bleeding already and we’re just warming up.” You know? It was amazing. Well, out of the blue, Laura, out of the blue, comes a guy up to me. I swear if I’m lying I’m dying. He flashes some sort of press credential at me and says, “I’m from CBS (Columbia Broadcasting System). Do you mind if we film this?” I instinctively and wrongfully said, “Sure, I don’t care. I don’t give a damn. Film it if you want to film it.” Now, I was always instructed by Ft. Bragg that whenever something like that occurred that I was supposed to get permission from Ft. Bragg. Well, I was angry with Ft. Bragg. I was angry with Ft. Dix. I just said, “Yes, go ahead and do it.” So I never heard another word about it. We finished our warm-ups. We conducted our show. We did a second show that afternoon, I remember, and then that trip was over and
back to Ft. Bragg we went. Never heard a word at all from Ft. Bragg. No one at Ft.
Bragg ever called me in and put me on the carpet saying what you did there at McGuire
was wrong. You should have gotten permission for doing that, blah blah blah blah. So it
was completely erased from my memory—well, not completely erased from memory but
it was long gone.

LC: Right. It was just something that happened.

RK: Just something that happened. Exactly. Now, fast-forward and we’ll get
into this in subsequent interviews, I’m sure. Fast forward to the second tour of duty in
Vietnam. I’m captain, rifle company commander. I’m at Cam Ranh Bay recovering
from falciparum malaria, which nearly killed me. I’m at this thirty-day recuperation sort
of Cam Ranh Bay center. Just finished playing nickel-dime-quarter poker with the boys
at the hospital ward where I was on. I get back into my bunk to rest and some guy
screams, “Hey, Kreger! You’re on television!” I raise up from my bunk and sure as hell
there I am on TV giving this hand-to-hand combat demonstration as a part of what CBS
filmed and later aired as *The Selling Of The Pentagon* documentary.

LC: No kidding.

RK: Yes ma’am. Yes ma’am. I’m on screen for about three seconds.

LC: Are you bleeding?

RK: No, no, no, no, no.

LC: Do you look good?


LC: I’m going to check it out.

RK: I was young. Well, so there he is and I just went ballistic. I mean, all the
other guys on the ward were slapping me on the back. This was great. Well, I come back
from my second tour and again I just put it out of my conscience. As I began teaching
about Vietnam here at Cerritos and looking at that period in my life objectively from the
point of view of a scholar, if I can say that now.

LC: I think you can. Yes.

RK: I said, “You know, I wonder.” I went over to the UCLA (University of
California at Los Angeles) media library and I’ll be damned if they don’t have on record
there this—now at that time it was, I think it was half-inch VHF. I don’t know if they’ve ever updated the technology of it. I would hope that they still have it on record.

LC: It would be my guess.

RK: I tried to get a copy from CBS for a couple years and they wanted five hundred dollars from me. I’d say, “Look I’m in this thing! You should—” blah blah blah blah. They never sent me a copy, but I know it’s there. So there I am myself. It shows about fifteen seconds totally of our hand-to-hand combat show, but there’s another fellow in it, Lieutenant Perrone, I believe was his name. He’s in it. It shows a couple others, but I’m in one of my throws in there. It was just great. Well, anyway that’s how I spent the thirteen months in between my trips. It was hard drinking, hard partying, with all of the innuendo that’s involved in that, time in my life. As I said earlier, I was probably not being a very good husband. My daughter was born. Kirsten was born during that time. I remember that I was so proud when the day she was born. I rushed back to the company headquarters. My wife Barbara gave birth. She barely gave me time to sit down in the waiting room she was so good with the delivery. We rushed off to the hospital early in the morning. Before I got settled into the waiting room my daughter had been born. So I rushed up and said hello to her and all that stuff. Then I rushed back to the company. I jumped out of the car. I screamed, “It’s a girl!” Everybody congratulated me. It was a very interesting time. It was a very sad time. If I had been more mature, if I had not been so easily affected by those around me, so caught up in my own self at the time, I know I would have been a better husband. I know I would have been a better father, but it just wasn’t to be at that time. I was still so young, so full of piss and vinegar, that I couldn’t see the forest for the trees. I didn’t understand the notion of responsibility and maturity and family life. I mean I was so caught up with myself and Green Beret machoism and those things that I remember saying to Barbara when she told me that she was pregnant. It was just an innocent quip. I said, “Well, it must be time for me to go back to Vietnam.” Why did I say that? Why would I say such a thing when she’s sharing with me that she’s pregnant with my child? I’ll be damned, three weeks later to the day I got orders. I don’t think that I could—I know that we haven’t spoken about this—of course, we did ultimately divorce. That story will come later, but I don’t
think she ever realized that I hadn’t volunteered. I did not volunteer to go back a second time.

LC: Did she think you probably had?

RK: I think she probably thought that I had volunteered to go back a second time simply to not be a father, to not get involved with child rearing. That hurts me. That hurts. If the opportunity ever arises that we would have a chance to talk about that I would want her to know that, but I haven’t. It remains certainly a very touchy subject, but that would be one thing that I would like for her to know before we both pass on. There might be that opportunity, but that does lead into how I got back to my second assignment in Vietnam.

LC: Well, Bob, can I ask you a couple of questions?

RK: Sure. Of course.

LC: I think that it sort of shows that maybe the two of you were kind of living separate lives. Although you were together there was a lot of space there, it sounds like, in between you.

RK: Yes. That’s a true statement.

LC: That those things happen. You’re very good to speak about it. Bob, let me ask you if on your touring around, which sounds pretty much like a blast actually—

RK: Indeed.

LC: Did you ever encounter—I mean, you’re giving these public demonstrations essentially of America’s military man, you know? You’re the kind of embodiment of the military man of America in 1970. Did you get backwash?

RK: Yes. Trenton, New Jersey. We got run out of a bar at gunpoint by some off-duty police officers in Trenton, New Jersey. We were in Trenton, New Jersey, for—well, it might have even been the same performance during Armed Forces Day because I know we were there at the same time as the Trenton 500, the racecar. We were partying one night with Mario Andretti, of all people. That was kind of a trip. But we were off-post in uniform, in our greens, partying at a tavern. One of the guys made goo-goo eyes at one of the girls and the locals took offense at that and in no uncertain terms told us that we weren’t welcome in that bar anymore.

LC: The whole lot of you?
RK: Yes, so we got the hell out of there.

LC: Were there any references to Vietnam in any of this?

RK: No, not that I can remember. It was more just inappropriate behavior on our part.

LC: Just out of bounds.

RK: Yeah, just out-of-bounds behavior. Of course, it was compounded by the fact that we were military and that we were in uniform. There’s no doubt about that. But we were sober enough to realize that when they pulled out their guns they meant business. So we got the hell out of that tavern and went back to the barracks.

LC: Did you ever get anything shouted at you?

RK: No. Most of the time it was wonderful. Another story, in Erie, Pennsylvania, for this air show that we were at in Erie, Pennsylvania. Now, Erie, Pennsylvania, is not a very big town.

LC: No it is not.

RK: We had to travel south to Pittsburgh to pick up equipment. We went down into Pittsburgh and we visited what was known as a Turners Club and Turners Clubs were and perhaps still are sort of a quasi-men’s fraternal organization, but they’re not Elks. They’re not Moose or anything like that. Not a fraternal order. It was just a social club of men. Typically the bout—it’s a two story structure, usually a wooden structure. The bottom floor is a bar and a restaurant and a place for families to eat, socialize and play cards. The upstairs floor might be a gymnasium perhaps with a small running track and a weight room and some mats. So we knew of these things. One of the guys, in fact, it was Jack Hughes who knew them because he was from western Pennsylvania. So we were in his country and he was showing us off. So we go into this Turners Club in uniform, shortly after we arrived in Erie to make arrangements to borrow their wrestling mats for our hand to hand combat show. We got permission from the club to borrow their wrestling mats. We took them and loaded them into the trucks we had. At the same time we invited them to come to the show and take a look at the show. Sunday after our performance we had to, early in the morning, we had to return the mats to the club, the Turners Club, and then catch a plane back to Ft. Bragg. We didn’t have a whole hell of a lot of time to do so, but because we were leaving from the club to go right back to Bragg,
I remember that most all of the team traveled together. In fact, it was comical because when we arrived in Erie the organizer of the air show presented each—there were three of us in the advance party. He presented each of us with the keys to a Ford Fairlane at that time, brand-new Ford Fairlane, and he said, “Here’s your car boys while you’re here in Erie and enjoy the car,” and blah blah blah. We really thought we were hot shit. It was amazing. We were treated like royalty—people asking us for autographs. I’d never had anybody ever ask me for my autograph before. Women falling all over you, literally. It was amazing. Anyway, so we do our show and here it is Sunday morning and we’re returning the mats to the Turners Club. We come into the bottom floor of this Turners Club and the whole bar is set up shot and a beer, shot and a beer, shot and a beer, shot and a beer all the way down the bar. The guys in the Turners Club said, “By gall damn! A couple of us boys were up there and we saw that show you guys did there yesterday. Man that’s some bad stuff! By God, now you’re going to learn how to drink western Pennsylvania style. Sit down here boys!” They sat us down at that bar and got us drunk on Sunday morning before we ever made it anywhere near an airplane. You’d drink a shot of whiskey and slip to the next stool and drink a beer, and move to the next stool and drink. The object was to see how many stools you could sit in before you fell off. I didn’t make too many stools. (Laughs) Except for the Trenton, New Jersey, incident we were always treated with respect by the organizers of the shows, by the people that we encountered. We came in contact with law enforcement agencies who were putting on shows. K-9 units were just coming on-line then in many police forces. They would be putting on shows of the dogs’ skills. We had a marvelous time with these organizations. We never encountered any animosity other than that one time when we certainly overstepped our bounds there.

LC: I mean, that really gives the lie to the perception that all of America was wracked with anti-war sentiment, anti-military beliefs, and that anybody in uniform had a target on their back.

RK: I don’t feel that way at all. I agree with you. I think it was certainly regional, as well. I don’t think we would have gotten the same sort of reception at Cal Berkeley.

LC: Understood, but that’s the most extreme example.
RK: That’s right. But in western Pennsylvania, in coal-mining country, where they filmed *The Deer Hunter*, we were very respected. It was. It was very warming to us to be received so well and treated with such respect.

LC: Did you have any encounters with older men who might be veterans who either had been in the Army or who had been in, say, World War II or anything come up to you guys and say, “Good job. Give them hell,” that kind of thing?

RK: No, not to my recollection.

LC: So mostly what you were collecting was women and beer steins?

RK: Yeah, but we made connection with men but I can’t recall that I ever—it must have happened to the guys from time to time when we traveled. We made several trips. Like I said, we were in Pennsylvania and New Jersey and North Carolina, South Carolina. We did make several trips, but certainly during that time there were times when it might not have happened to me. I might not have been there at the time when a veteran might have come up to one of the guys and said words like that.

LC: Sure. I would very much expect that that happened at some point.

RK: Yeah, I think so.

LC: Did you have any idea, basically, who Jane Fonda was?

RK: No. Not really.

LC: Okay. Did it surprise you to hear a general say we can’t handle security at Ft. Dix?

RK: Yeah. Yeah. It did.

LC: Did you see anything during that day or hear anything that would lead you to think there was some massive protest or some huge security threat to Ft. Dix?

RK: No. Never saw her. Never saw any of the people that were with her.

LC: What a strange incident.

RK: Yeah. I tell my students now at this part of my life I say—people ask me, “Do you have animosity toward Jane Fonda?” and my answer has to be “No.” I understand that I don’t probably represent what a lot of mainstream former military soldiers think, but I don’t hold any powerful grudge against her. I tell my young students, I say, “The reason is because, yes, she was born with a silver spoon in mouth. Yes, she came from privilege and had a different background than you and I do.” But
here was a woman who made a moral decision and stood by her convictions. Now, albeit
what she did by visiting North Vietnam and being photographed with the enemy was
probably not the smartest thing she ever did, but I tell them how many of us have done
stupid things when we’re young that we regret later on?

LC: Yeah. All hands in the air.

RK: All hands in the air, exactly. I said, “I don’t begrudge her the fact that she
made a decision to be in opposition against the war and stuck by the convictions of her
decision.” I said, “When I compare myself to her I find myself wanting because I was
wishy-washy. I hadn’t thought about the politics of Vietnam. I hadn’t thought about
whether I was for or against the war. I was just off on this quest of mine to grow up so to
speak.” So, I mean, for those reasons I don’t harbor a grudge against her. I think she
made a bad decision no doubt, but I do think now, at this stage in her life based on what
I’ve heard her say recently in the media that she does regret that and wishes she hadn’t.
But like, I said, goodness sakes, how many of us have never done anything stupid?

LC: Right. Right. I think, well, Bob, maybe we can talk about that later, but it’s
interesting to hear your perspective. It’s an important one to make sure that we record.

RK: Thank you for that, Laura. I guess in the strictest definition of the word she
was treasonous in her actions. She was giving aid and comfort to the enemy. Come on.
That’s kind of a stretch, to me, to think that way. I don’t think she consciously said to
herself I’m going to visit and I’m going to get photographed and I’m going to raise a
bunch of stink and cause a whole bunch of trouble. I don’t think people wake up in the
morning thinking that they’re going to do evil that day consciously. Now some people do
perhaps, but that’s the worst of our society.

LC: Well, and her visit to North Vietnam came some two years after the time
we’re speaking about now. She was very busy being part of the civilian anti-war
movement in this country for many years including the period that we’re talking about
1970. This was—her visit to North Vietnam didn’t happen until 1972. Bob, I’ve got to
ask you this because you’ve made the reference a couple of times to the kind of
machismo trip that sort of was the Special Forces experience at this time anyway, maybe
still is. How did you stay in shape to pull off what you guys were pulling off? I mean, to
make these demonstrations and be drinking and out carousing with Mario Andretti and
whoever else showed up. Is it because you were twenty-three years old that you could do anything?

RK: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

LC: I mean, you guys must have been severely buff, you know what I’m saying?

RK: We were. We were. Yeah.

LC: But then there were a lot of beers down the drain, too.

RK: Yeah, that’s right.

LC: I’m trying to figure out, at my age, how does that figure out.

RK: Yeah. It catches up to you real quick. Yeah, I mean, we were physically fit.

All the members of the hand-to-hand combat team, we practiced five days a week for two and a half to three hours each day.

LC: Now this is hard, high intensity—

RK: Yeah. This is high intensity athletics. A lot of throwing and twisting and lifting and things like that. Besides, of course, you had your normal Army physical fitness regimen that you had to maintain as a member of the Army in addition to that, but make no mistake there were some mornings when we woke up and the world was pretty doggone fuzzy.

LC: Understood.

RK: You’d wonder if you were going to make it to the next night, but somehow you did.

LC: Now how did you manage food, for example, when you were traveling? Did you guys try to stay on some kind of regimen like that?

RK: Oh, no!

LC: Just burgers and fries would be fine?

RK: Oh, burgers and fries and steaks and chicken.

LC: Whatever you could get, really?

RK: Everything. Yeah. It was normally all free.

LC: Yeah. I’m thinking. You guys really—

RK: We got off the airplane there in little Erie, Pennsylvania, and this gentleman walks up and gives us the keys to Ford Fairlanes for, crying out loud.

LC: This is like being a rock star.
RK: Oh, yeah! Yeah. Then he said to us, he said, “Here’s what I’ve got you lined up for. I’ve got a radio talk show for you in Pittsburgh at 7:00 PM. You’ve got to be down there in Pittsburgh at seven o’clock. So why don’t you get back to your hotels and get settled in.” This was just the three of us, Jack Hughes, Sergeant Ryan, and myself. “Then I’ve got another possibility for a late night talk show at 1:00 AM in the morning.” Okay. So now we go back to the hotel. It’s our first day in Erie. We get settled in. We change clothes. We were visited by some local folks. Then we put on our uniforms and head down south to Pittsburgh. We got there for the first talk show. I remember it was pretty intense. We were being interviewed on the radio, live on the radio, and the notion was that we were just supposed to sit there and just answer these questions. One woman called in and identified by name—I can’t remember what her name was. She said, “Is it true that United States Army Special Forces soldiers practice Chinese Communist torture techniques?” I looked at Jack and Jack looked at me. Before either one of us could answer Sergeant Ryan—I can’t remember his first name. He says on live radio, “No ma’am. We have our own.” Oh, my God! (Laughs)

LC: You’re not being followed around by press officers or anything?

RK: No. No.

LC: This is just completely wide open.

RK: Yeah. Wide open. We conducted that radio interview and by then we had found out that the 1:00 AM show was scheduled. We had to kill time from about eight o’clock until one o’clock. We found a tavern called Fat Daddy’s on the outskirts of Pittsburgh.

LC: I’m getting a visual on this.

RK: Oh, God, yes. It was country-western red neck, Fat Daddy’s, but here we were, the three of us in uniform. We walked in that place. We looked around. I remember that—yeah, there’s an incident. A young man came up, well, not a young man but an older man came up who was in civilian clothes. He starts to scream to the other people in the bar, “God damn!” He says, “Ladies and gentlemen, I don’t know who these guys are, but I can tell because their boots are bloused these guys are paratroopers and I was a paratrooper once long ago. By God, let’s get these guys some drinks!” There the three of us sat. Free booze all night long and at about 12:30 we looked at each other and
said, “You know we’re supposed to be on the radio again at one o’clock. Holy shit!
What are we going to do?” We played odd man out and two of us went down to the radio
station and the other one stayed at Fat Daddy’s to continue the party. After we did our
radio show from about one to two o’clock in the morning we went back to Fat Daddy’s.
We left there at about 4:00 AM. Oh, it was crazy, Laura. It was crazy. I remember
driving back. I mean, I’m really telling stories now. Now you got me started. I
remember driving. It was four o’clock in the morning, 4:30 in the morning. We’re
severely drunk and this was a long time before don’t-drink-and-drive rules. Jack and
Sergeant Ryan, they’re in the backseat of this Ford. They’re passed out sleeping, a little
laughing and joking. All three of us have taken off our uniform jackets or at least we’ve
unbuttoned them. We’ve loosened up our ties by now. I’m traveling south on Highway
55 in the opposite direction because I’m lost and besides I’m inebriated. I’m traveling
south on Highway 55 when all of a sudden I see police lights behind me. I thought, “Oh
geez. Here we go. Come on boys, here we go.” This Pennsylvania Highway Patrol
officer pulls me up. I swear it again if I’m lying I’m dying. He walks up to the side of
the car and by now I have rolled down the window and I’m sitting there trying to sit up as
straight as I can and act as coherent as I can. I know I’m in trouble. I don’t know exactly
how deeply I’m in trouble at the moment and the other two guys. He shines his flashlight
in my eyes and looks around the car. He shines the flashlight in the back of the car and
he sees the other two guys sitting there. He says to me, “Can I help you?” I said, “Yes.
Can you tell me how to go north on Highway 55?” Now imagine, it’s just a two-lane
road. One lane north, one lane south, but I’m traveling south. I said to him, “Yeah. Can
you tell me how to go north on Highway 55?” He looked in, paused for a few seconds,
and he simply said, “Soldier, turn around.” And that was it!

LC: He went and got back in his—
RK: He went got back in his patrol car. We turned around and eventually made it
back to our hotel, motel there in Erie. God what a story, but it’s true. It was just comical
as hell. He could’ve thrown us in jail for ever and ever I suppose at that point, but all he
said was, “Soldier, just turn around.” And so we did.
LC: That’s pretty cool. Bob, how aware were you at the time that this was goodwill-building for the Army, that this whole exercise was part of the military saying to the American people we’re okay, we’re on your side, we’re part of you?

RK: About —oh, I don’t know, I’m just guessing—maybe forty percent of me knew that that’s what we were doing. It was party time that thirteen months as the traveling commander, but especially when we were doing the Friday morning Gabriel Demonstrations and particularly especially when we were invited to come inside the JFK Center and give an indoor walk-on presentation, especially as I said earlier, to someone as high ranking as the commander of the Japanese ground forces. There we clearly knew that we were under a spotlight and that we represented the United States Army Green Berets. We doggone sure better be on our best behavior and just present ourselves professionally to the public.

LC: Did you have a sense that this was, that this command that you had was leading you somewhere? You were being shown off as the exemplar, in fact, of the Special Forces.

RK: Well, not really.

LC: Were you thinking in career terms? You’re already a captain.

RK: Oh, yes. Yes. I was clearly thinking in career terms. I really was. I thought that my career was off to a good start.

LC: It was, wasn’t it?

RK: It was. I mean, it turned sour pretty quickly, but it was off to a good start.

LC: Well, we’ll get to that I presume. Okay, let’s take a break Bob if you want to.

LC: Go ahead, Bob.

RK: Okay. Let me bring us to the point where I’m leaving for my second trip.

LC: Very good. Okay.

RK: So I, as I said earlier, about almost to the day three weeks after I made that silly remark to my wife Barbara I received orders to go to Camp Friendship, Korat in Thailand. This was a plush assignment. I had already received an information packet from the commanding general of the base welcoming me to his command. It was first-class treatment. I was going to be a member of the JUSMAG (Joint United States
Military Advisory Group) headquarters staff in the J-3 operations area. All I had to do was make one helicopter jump before I left and I would receive Airborne pay the entire time I was there. The letter of introduction told me where the air-conditioned officers quarters were and the tennis courts and the swimming pools and the mess hall. I thought to myself, “God, what in the hell did I ever do to deserve such a plush assignment as this? I’m going to Thailand. Wow.” I went in to the adjutant of the 7th Special Forces group there at Ft. Bragg. I cannot recall his name and I certainly don’t want to cast any bad aspirations on him, but I went in to this guy who had been, I believe he had been a master sergeant or maybe an E-9 and had taken a direct commission as captain. He’s now the adjutant of the group. I was just a first-year captain. I was—well, second-year captain by then. I mean, I was brand new as far as time-in-grade as captain. I flashed these orders at him and I said, “Would you look at this? God, I’m going to Camp Friendship, Korat. It’s an Airborne assignment. It’s JUSMAG.” He looked at those orders and he sat there behind his desk. He looked at those orders for a while and he said, “God damn, Kreger. That’s a hell of a job. That’s a hell of an assignment. Congratulations. Good for you.” That was it. I left feeling all full of myself. Laura, three weeks later my orders to Thailand were revoked. I was reassigned to the 23rd Infantry Division headed for Vietnam. Now, I cannot say for sure if he got my assignment, but somebody got my assignment and went to Camp Friendship, Korat. It may have been him. I don’t know, but that taught me a lesson. Keep your mouth shut.

LC: Yeah. Say less than you know. Yeah. Yeah. I think that’s right. So you had these orders in hand and were ready to go. Where were you when you got the change of orders?


LC: So you had three weeks of Nirvana, basically?

RK: Oh, yeah. Three weeks of Nirvana, as you said. Three weeks of, “God, this is a wonderful assignment.” Three weeks to talk about it with my wife, of course, and discuss what was going to be happening and blah blah blah.

LC: Would this assignment have been one that would have allowed her and the children to come with you?
RK: No. It was an unaccompanied tour, but to me it was kind of a tour that would—I was still going to be with Special Forces, but it would have been a different variety of Special Forces, I think.

LC: Well, you would have been a staff officer.

RK: Yeah. I would have been a staff officer. I would have been a junior staff officer surrounded by majors and lieutenant colonels and colonels and I would have had to behave myself. I would have had to behave myself and I would have had to perform. I was looking forward to that chance. I was looking forward to the adventure of Thailand. As I said, it was a pretty plush assignment to get a packet of information from the general saying “Welcome to my command.” That was pretty special potatoes back then.

LC: “Here’s where the pool is.” That’s—yeah.

RK: Yeah. “Here’s where the pool is.” Like I said, almost three weeks again here come the revoke orders and I was reassigned to the 23rd Infantry Division, the Americal.

LC: This came in, if I can—?

RK: That came in—that would have been probably August of 1970.

LC: Wow. All right, Bob, let’s hold there.

RK: Okay.
Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Dr. Robert Kreger. Today is the sixteenth of February 2006. I am in Lubbock and Bob is in California in his office at Cerritos College. Good morning, Bob.

Robert Kreger: Good morning, Laura. Good morning to you again.

LC: Thank you. I want to just clarify the issue of how it was that you were assigned to the Americal Division in 1970. Can you talk about that for a moment?

RK: Sure. Well, as we said earlier I had received orders to go to Thailand and was very excited about that assignment, but suddenly three weeks after I went to the group adjutant there at Ft. Bragg it just came to me in the mail, a normal mail postal sort of thing. The orders had been revoked and I had been reassigned to the 23rd Infantry Division, the Americal, at a certain APO and a certain location in Vietnam. I was to report to that location. I just accepted it. I didn’t question it. I never received from the Special Forces people any negativism. They never said to me, “Well, based on what we see in your record, we no longer want you in Special Forces.” There was never anything like that so I had no reason to suspect that I had been dismissed from Special Forces as an officer, but only that I had been reassigned.

LC: At this point you’re a captain.

RK: Yes.

LC: Did you see your efficiency reports and so on just like normal?

RK: No. No. Gosh. That’s an interesting question. Well, all my efficiency reports to that point had been reasonably good. I do recall that on the A team because of the shenanigans that Joel Sapp and I did from time to time, I do remember that Captain Chiles, who was my CO at A-245, I do remember that he—well, I can’t be factual about it, Laura, but I know that he probably would not have given me a high recommendation to become the CO of the team.

LC: Right. You suggested that earlier. Yeah.
RK: Yeah. That may be why—there might have been something in my record to that effect that I did not know about but, again, when the orders were revoked and I was reassigned I took it as part of the Army. I took it as part of the larger process. I thought of it, “Well, perhaps I’m needed more there than in Special Forces.” I was disappointed certainly, but I shook it off and just because I was thinking of the military as a career. I consider myself to be professional soldier, so I was just doing my job.

LC: Well, tell me about going over to Vietnam the second time. How did that come about?

RK: Scared to death.

LC: Really?

RK: Scared to death. I was thinking about this this morning as I came in to get ready for this particular portion of our interview. I do tell this to people who will listen to me. I realized as I went over the second time and, you know, again you fly over with a whole group of military guys. You’re on this big plane. You’re surrounded by anxiety, but I remember consciously realizing I’m flying back to a dangerous situation. When that didn’t happen the first trip because the first trip it was a quest. It was unknown. I didn’t know what to expect and therefore not knowing what to expect I didn’t have any fear of it that I can recall, but now I knew. But now I knew one false move and you could die. Being in the wrong place at the wrong time you could die. Being drunk when you shouldn’t be drunk you could die. Making a mistake of any type could result in death or serious injury and combined with that, of course, a sense of responsibility. As a captain—this would have been in September of ’70 when I made the flight back. Gosh, I had been captain for about a year, maybe fourteen months by then. I was growing into those captain’s bars and enjoying it. I felt a sense of responsibility as an officer and knew that I had certain standards to live to. I knew that I was a combat veteran as well and that much more would be expected of me the second time, no matter what my job ended up being, but because of the fact that people would look at me and say “Well, here’s a guy who’s been here before. He ought to know what the hell to do.”

LC: People would look to you. Surely.
RK: Yeah. I had that sense of awareness and knowing that I was going to be challenged in that way. So, yeah, to sum it all up, I was very apprehensive. I knew that if I wasn’t careful things could go bad and they could go bad real quickly.

LC: Was there any part of this calculus that included the fact that your family was larger now? You had been back essentially with them. I know there was probably some not so great times there, but still you had a family with children now and was that part of the anxiety, too?

RK: Well, I wish I could say that it were a large part of the anxiety, but in all honesty probably not—still so very immature emotionally with family responsibilities and those types of issues. When I left the second time my daughter Kirsten was just three months old. I don’t recall that I consciously said to myself, “Oh, boy. I’m leaving behind a young wife with two small children and, wow, how is she going to get by? Wow, I’d better stay alive so I can come home to be a parent.” I’m but twenty-three-and-a-half years old or so twenty-four at the time.

LC: Yeah I was just gonna draw attention to that.

RK: That’s why I guess I’d have to call that a regret. I mean, I regret not being more mature emotionally at that time and able to give Barbara a proper goodbye, to give her a proper sense of the fact that her husband is growing and learning and is going to be careful and is going to come home. I don’t think I left her with that feeling. I’m almost tempted to say that I left her with the feeling of good riddance. You know, “Go ahead and go off to war again and I’ll be fine without you.” Now I can’t verify that, of course, but if I were her that’s probably how I would’ve been thinking about me.

LC: Well, thinking about you from the military point of view you’re twenty-three years old and a captain. I mean, this is really pretty unusual. I’m sure you know that.

RK: Yes.

LC: You’ve been a captain, as you say, you’ve been in grade for over a year. I mean, it’s really pretty unusual. You were just mentioning earlier that you felt some of the weight of that responsibility was beginning to kind of hit you?

RK: Yes. I also could, Laura, I could feel myself changing and growing clearly not at a fast enough pace to suit others, including Barbara, perhaps, as my wife and the mother of my children. Perhaps others might have included senior commanders who
were looking at me and evaluating my performance. Within my own skin, though, I could kind of feel like things were changing and they were changing for the better, but it was a long, slow process.

LC: It usually is. It usually is, but you had the accelerator of another tour coming up. Where did you come in to country?


LC: Really? Wow. Do you actually, though, remember arriving to a place?

RK: Well, I remember arriving and in-processing. I remember—gosh, that’s interesting that I can’t remember that. Well, what could it have been? Would it have been Cam Ranh Bay once again or maybe Long Binh? But I—

LC: Going to Americal it could have been either of those or Tan Son Nhut.

Yeah.

RK: Well, now that you say it, it was probably Tan Son Nhut. Of all those three names that’s the one that rings a little bit of a bell.

LC: What happened at in processing? Was there anything that stands out as you recall?

RK: No. Nothing that stood out as particularly alarming one way or the other. I remember not being lost in the shuffle, but I remember also not being treated with any sort of special care as a returning person, as a captain. As officers, of course, we did receive different types of treatment in the in-processing centers, but I was quickly put in touch, as I remember, quickly put in touch with liaison people from the 23rd and got into the business of processing into that unit and making it down to the headquarters elements where I would ultimately be assigned. Yeah.

LC: How did you get out there, out to the headquarters? Do you remember?

RK: Boy. I don’t. I mean, sad to say that’s a little fuzzy.

LC: That’s okay.

RK: I don’t—no, I don’t remember.

LC: Do you remember what it looked like? Was there a command post or were you at headquarters company?

RK: Well, gosh, that’s interesting. I mean, that’s again that’s kind of fuzzy in my memory here this morning. Boy, oh, boy.
LC: That's fine. If I were you I might have blocked some of this experience.

RK: Well, yeah, it may be that I'm blocking it out somehow conscious or unconscious, but I don’t remember much of it. To me it was just routine, perhaps that’s why it didn’t stick in my mind. I don’t recall that we encountered any incoming rockets or mortar fire while I was in the in-processing centers. It was just, you know, get up in the morning, have a meal, and go about your business and do what people tell you to do and wait until you get shipped out to someplace else.

LC: Do you remember who you—?

RK: Well, I ultimately wound up assigned to Bravo Company of the 3rd Battalion of the 21st Infantry of the 196th.

LC: Now what was the composition of B Company?

RK: Well, before that I was assigned to headquarters and Headquarters Company.

LC: For how long?

RK: For one month. So I was at headquarters and Headquarters Company of the 3rd Battalion 21st Infantry of the 196th, and the battalion commander was a wonderful man by the name of Charles P. Saint. He’s another man in my Vietnam experience who was a wonderful professional soldier and treated his subordinates with respect and demanded a lot and who because of that commanded a lot of respect and didn’t have to work hard to earn it. I thought he was a fine commander. He was always very square with me. He assigned me as the battalion adjutant, the S-1 officer, for the battalion there at—boy, gosh, where were we located? This was before the battalion moved to Da Nang so we were south. I can’t recall the name of our battalion area headquarters. Gosh. Anyway, so for one month there I was as the battalion commander. I’m sorry, as the battalion adjutant and I bitched on the radio to him almost every day that, you know, “Gosh, sir, I’m a combat veteran. I’m former Special Forces. I should be a rifle company commander. Come on let’s get me out in the field where I can do the best. I’m not real good at pushing these papers around these desks.” Words to that effect almost every day. I’m sure that it wore heavily on Colonel Saint’s mind that he had this somewhat gung-ho experienced captain, at least the captain thought he was. Colonel Saint was probably just doing his job the best he knew how to do and waiting for the appropriate time to give me
another assignment, but I remember really bugging the hell out of him. He must have been frustrated with me at times.

LC: Well, what does a battalion adjutant do?

RK: Well, you are responsible for all the personnel matters. Finance comes under your jurisdiction, in-processing, out-processing of people. The processing at that time of soldiers who claimed to be conscientious objectors, submitting people for awards, all of the admin and records and personnel records of the men in the battalion are part-and-parcel of what a battalion adjutant does. The S-2 is the intelligence officer. The S-3 is the operations officer. The S-4 is the logistics officer. In my case for the first one month I was the personnel officer. So I learned how to do some of those things.

LC: Did you have to meet with people who were designated as COs, conscientious objectors?

RK: From time to time, yes, but not frequently. That was typically handled between the CO and that particular person’s commanding officer, but I was not the CO of headquarters, Headquarters Company. That was another officer. I was just a member of his company. Our battalion policy was—of course, now we’re talking of an era. Now I’m assigned to an American division, American unit. I’m completely separated now from Montagnards and any direct contact with Vietnamese. Myself, I’m having to learn a whole new way of going about doing war, a whole new way going about doing everyday normal business because now my everyday contact is with American soldiers who have American problems and American needs. The conscientious objector policy went something like this: that when a young man came into the battalion and claimed CO status they had seventy-two hours within which to process the papers. If the papers demonstrated that this person had a legitimate claim as a CO then they would be reassigned perhaps to headquarters and Headquarters Company. They would become a mail clerk or a supply clerk or a finance clerk. Or perhaps if they were in a rifle company they would remain in the rear area and again perform some type of administrative or logistical function back in the rear area. If, however, the decision of CO status, which—I don’t remember that it was at the battalion level. I think it was higher than battalion, although I may be wrong ‘cause as the adjutant I never remember designating someone CO or not CO. It may have been out of my hands. But if the decision was that this
person didn’t have a legitimate claim then they would be told by their respective
commander that your claim for CO status has been rejected. Now you are expected to
walk off the firebase the next time that your company returns to combat. Then, of course,
the decision was clearly in their hands, do so or not do so. So that was the first month of
my second trip.

LC: Now this, as you’ve indicated, didn’t suit you very well, right?
RK: No, well—I mean, I think I did a reasonably good job as the adjutant, but I
wasn’t enthusiastic about it.

LC: Right. Right. You wanted to be in combat?
RK: I wanted to be back in the field. Yeah. I wanted to. It’s crazy to say but,
yes. Now it’s not that I missed it. I was kind of thinking about this this morning, as well.
I wanted to demonstrate to all those who could see my skills, my dedication to the Army,
my confidence in myself, and to—maybe I’m sounding too self-centered, but I felt I
could be doing more service if I were in the field than doing adjutant’s work back in the
rear, if that makes any sense at all.

LC: I think it does.
RK: So for those reasons that’s why I was pestering Colonel Saint.

LC: You had the training. You had the experience.
RK: Yeah. I mean, I didn’t miss getting shot at. Oh, hell no! I didn’t miss that
aspect of it, but I longed for the opportunity to perform well. That I thought I could best
do if I was—as a rifle company commander ‘cause, after all, I was a veteran. I’d been
through combat for a year. After all, I was former Special Forces, blah blah blah. Come
on Colonel Saint. Give me a command and see how I do and he did. He did.

LC: That’s what B Company was.
RK: That’s why I moved, yeah. He called me on the radio one afternoon and
said, “I’m going to give you Bravo Company and I want you to come out to the firebase
as quickly as you can.” He was somewhat disappointed in the performance of the Bravo
Company commander at that time. Is it fair to mention his name?

LC: If you care to.
RK: Well, his name was Captain Jerry Tangey. Jerry became a very close friend
of mine later on in the second year of my duty there, but at the moment apparently
Captain Tangey was not doing what Colonel Saint wanted him to do. I specifically remember Colonel Saint saying to me, “Captain Tangey’s body count is not high enough.” That simple statement reflects so much of that particular time in Vietnam and the influence of General Westmoreland and his policies and the influence of the way the war was going—this perception that a war of attrition could be won against the Vietnamese enemy. To my mind, and I’m getting political here, this block-headedness of the military and the politicians combined saying simply, “Well, hell, if we kill enough of them they’re going to have to stop fighting.” It just didn’t work and it was never going to work. The Viet Cong and the NVA were much more dedicated to that cause than American soldiers were ever dedicated to stopping it. I think that’s one of the root causes of some of the failures of our efforts in Vietnam. We simply at the highest levels, and I know I’m not a scholar on this, we simply never realized the true level of nationalism and the effect of Ho Chi Minh and the concept of nationalism and pride of country that we were up against. Anyway, that’s a hell of a digression.

LC: That’s okay. If you don’t mind, I’d like to take those questions up with you in a little more depth later.

RK: Sure. Sure. I assumed command of Bravo Company of the 3rd Battalion, 21st Infantry of the 196th and it was—well it started off in a hell of a way, too.

LC: Now this would have been roughly October-November?

RK: Yeah. This was probably late October or so of 1970. Yes. I remember the second day of my command I remember being back in the rear area getting my stuff ready to go and cleaning up affairs with the adjutants and so forth, office affairs, and because the day earlier apparently the transfer had been made official somehow—I don’t remember that there were ever orders cut—but I got another phone call from the firebase. LZ Center was our firebase.

LC: Center?

RK: Center. C-E-N-T-E-R. Saying that one of my soldiers had been killed and that I should go over to graves registration and identify the body. I said, “Well, hell, I’ve never been to the field with my unit. How can I identify a body of someone I’ve never even seen?” That didn’t wash because the bottom line was I was the new commander and I was back at the rear area. This man’s body had already been
returned to the rear area. So it was my job to go over and make an identification. I thought to myself, “How in the hell am I going to do this?” But I did. I went over. I found my way to the graves registration people and identified myself as Captain Kreger, Bravo Company commander. “I understand there’s—” “Oh, yeah! PFC (private first class) Stroud is his name.” I said, “Oh, PFC Stroud.” I didn’t even know who the hell PFC Stroud was, but here was a young PFC. He’d been in Vietnam about three weeks Laura. During a combat operation he and another PFC—I believe it was a PFC. I never fully got the full story—another soldier were putting out claymore mines and PFC Stroud, the youngest newbie to the company or one of the youngest newbies in the company, was under the supervision of this other fellow who probably didn’t have a hell of a lot of experience doing what he was supposed to be doing, either. So apparently perhaps a squad leader, perhaps a platoon leader, had said to these two soldiers, “I want you to go out there and put up a claymore mine.” So they went out there and they put the damn thing up wrong and it blew up on them. PFC Stroud was burnt so badly from head to foot, practically, by the impact of a claymore mine I couldn’t recognize him. I didn’t know what it was. I mean, the people there at graves registration they uncovered this body. I looked down at this charred mass of what was once a young boy and I thought, “Okay.” I simply said, “Yeah that looks to me like PFC Stroud.” It could have been the man in the moon. But I do remember that that was one of my first official duties as the Bravo Company commander. I thought to myself, “Gee, that’s a hell of a start.” I haven’t even been to the field with my unit yet and one of them is dead.

LC: Well, it’s pretty disturbing.

RK: Yeah. Again, perhaps it’s just a case study or a symptomatic of the whole thing. I mean, here were these young boys with almost no experience, but I mean the records show that the average age of an infantryman in Vietnam was, what, nineteen years of age.

LC: Something like that. Yeah. Younger than the kids in your classrooms.

RK: Yes. Yeah. Younger than the kids in the college classrooms today. Here I am, their commander, at the ripe old age of twenty-four. Whoop dee-do! I mean, I know everything in the world at twenty-four, don’t I? Of course.
LC: Well, it boggles the mind, really. Bob, can I ask you about graves registration? Who would have been working there with it? Would those have been enlisted people who just drew that assignment?

RK: Well, you know, that’s an interesting question and it’s one that I often talk about when I give my little Vietnam talks to my students. Imagine the emotional impact of having a graves registration job where day in and day out your duty is to handle bodies and put them in thick rubber bags and send them back and how emotional that would have been and the types of memories that those men have now. Graves registration units were, gosh, I think they were a part of the headquarters/headquarters element, typically NCOs. Not a large contingent of men. I don’t know. Probably had a master sergeant or maybe even an E-9 as their senior NCO and then the other men would be lesser ranks. They might have had a lieutenant who was in charge of graves registration at the time. I don’t know. But they were—and I don’t know that they weren’t volunteers.

LC: Might that be where COs might end up sometimes?

RK: It’s possible. It’s possible that that could have been the type of work that a CO would have been given. That seems sort of ironic doesn’t it? That someone who objected to death would deal with death everyday.

LC: They wouldn’t be armed.

RK: Yeah. They wouldn’t be armed. Exactly. That was the only difference.

The only thing was they weren’t armed.

LC: Do you recall where or how they were set up? Did they have more or less a permanent structure that they were working in?

RK: Yes. Yeah it was a permanent type of structure. I don’t remember much of it, Laura.

LC: I’m sure you didn’t stay very long.

RK: No. I didn’t stay very long and I did my job and got back in the jeep and got the heck out of there, but it seemed like a hospital setting. It seemed like the type of a physical setting that was built to facilitate that particular function. It didn’t look like a— how can I say it? It didn’t look like an American hospital, but it clearly wasn’t a day room situation, either.
LC: They weren’t essentially on the run. This was more or less a permanent facility.

RK: This was more or less a permanent—yes. This was back in the rear area of the battalion and the brigade.

LC: Are you up by near Da Nang at this point?

RK: Boy, I wish I could remember. No I don’t believe. See we weren’t—the battalion didn’t move over into the Da Nang area until an element of the Marines left. I can’t recall the exact details of that. That came a little bit later. So I joined the company on the firebase and became acquainted with the first sergeant and the other NCOs, the platoon sergeants, my platoon leaders. There’s not a whole heck of a lot to say.

LC: Did they look up to you as somebody who had already been?

RK: Oh, I think so.

LC: Was that kind of what the conversation was about? Do you remember?

“Yeah, I’ve already been over here up in the mountains.”

RK: Well, yeah. They could recognize that I had been in Vietnam before probably because to some extent my demeanor, to some extent, hopefully, my confidence that I showed them, but clearly I was also qualified at that time to wear the Special Forces patch on my right side.

LC: Which you were doing.

RK: Which I was doing, which signified to all who knew that I had been in combat with Special Forces previously. That served as a sort of a signal to those people that I had some experience. Now, of course, it was up to me to show them my experience was worthwhile for them personally.

LC: That it mattered.

RK: That it mattered. It wasn’t just doing time, but it was learning from the doing of the time and I guess—and I thought about it over the years, that’s how I perceived my job as a rifle company commander. That’s what I said to them. It sounds crazy, but all I could think of was the old Knute Rockne movie with Ronald Reagan and the half-time talks, football thing, and all that stuff. Win one for the Gipper kind of thing. I remember on one of the first meetings where I had with the officers and the NCOs of the company. I said, “My job, gentlemen, is to keep all of you alive. My responsibility is
to see that each and everyone of us returns to America alive to our loved ones and, by
hell or damn crook, that’s what I’m going to do my very best to do. In my view the best
way to do that is to be offensive in the field rather than defensive in the field.” That was
my sort of football analogy there. That when we go out on combat operations we’re not
going to sit around idly waiting for somebody to smack us. We’re going to be out
actively patrolling in good weather and in bad weather and we would be actively moving
around as often as is necessary so that we do not present to the enemy the opportunity to
ambush us or to strike us when we are not aware of it. That’s kind of the way I came
about the operation as a commander. I mean, other than that I don’t recall having any
magic sort of philosophy toward command of a rifle company. I do remember that I
expected my officers and my NCOs—I expected all the people to be professional and to
act in a professional manner, which is something that I did not do, sadly, as time went by.
We’ll get to those stories later on, but I held myself and I held them to a pretty high
standard thinking that if everybody does what they’re told to do without me having to
ride herd on them all the time that we would be all right. I didn’t enjoy having to
discipline people. I thought that they just ought to do their damn job without having me
to scold them into doing their jobs, threaten them with disciplinary action if you don’t
behave like a soldier. This is probably because of the result of my dealing with Special
Forces soldiers who were all volunteers and who all looked at their job as a professional
commitment. Now I’m dealing with two-year draftees who don’t want to be there and
trying to convince them that they ought to be loyal American, true blue, ody colldy,
gung-ho soldiers and all they want to do is go home. So there were some conflicts from
the very beginning. Yeah.

LC: Tell me, Bob, before we go on, I think this will be helpful for people to
understand how the organization looked underneath you. Can you just run over that very
quickly?

RK: Well, sure. We were a rifle company. I had four platoons. You had three
rifle platoons and a heavy weapons platoon. Each platoon had a platoon leader. Well, let
me start at the top. A rifle company is commanded by a captain, that was me. Then you
have what’s called the command post and that would consist of what was called the field
first sergeant, typically a senior NCO, could be an E-7 or perhaps an E-8, senior NCO
who had some experience. Then you had radio telephone operators. You had artillery
forward observers. You had your medics. In some cases you had Kit Carson Scouts. Kit
Carson Scouts were the supposedly repatriated Viet Cong or ARVN, not ARVN, but
NVA officers who had seen the light and who were now working for the Americans as
scouts to scout out the enemy and as translators. The command post typically would be
five to seven or eight soldiers. Then you had your four rifle, you had your four platoons.
The platoons were commanded by a lieutenant who was a first lieutenant. Then you
would have a platoon sergeant underneath that who was usually, as well, an E-6, perhaps
an E-7, sometimes E-5, but those were more mature soldiers. They were leaders. Many
of them were on their second tour of duty, as well. I remember one of my platoon
 sergeants, guy by the name of Stargell. My goodness, he was a big, strapping guy, but I
believe he was on his third tour of duty already. He had been involved in Project
Phoenix, some other pretty nasty stuff earlier so I kind of stayed away from him. I let
him do what he wanted to do. (Laughs)

LC: Yeah. “You go ahead.”

RK: “You run your platoon your way. If I have to tell you something to do just
say, ‘Yes, sir’ and go do it.” My view of them was they were all wonderful men. They
were all just wonderful guys. I have a same view for my company of men. Young
soldiers doing the damn best job they could. Some of them were disciplinary problems
and we can get into that later on. It came back to haunt me. Then you had—so a platoon
consisted of about, oh, I think the TO&E (Table of Organization and Equipment) said
somewhere in the vicinity of forty men or so. Those would be divided into squads. A
squad had a squad leader who was typically an E-5 or maybe an E-4 and then your other
soldiers. The weapons platoon carried the heavier stuff, the mortars. If you had, oh, 81-
millimeter mortar or sometimes 60-millimeter mortars, but it wasn’t convenient to carry
around a lot of heavy equipment in the field, certainly not where we operated. The
weapons platoon often times became almost like a rifle platoon as well.

LC: So they might leave the heavy stuff at the firebase?

RK: Yes. Yeah. So the concept of operations, at least for our battalion—the
battalion consisted of three rifle companies and a headquarters/headquarters company and
a heavy weapons or sort of a support company. I believe that’s what it was. The
headquarters/headquarters company and the weapons company, those people would be—
no, the weapons platoon—I’m even getting myself confused. Rifle Company— anyway, the weapons platoon was I believe a part of headquarters/headquarters company. That platoon with the big stuff, the 4.2s and the 81 mortars and if you had recoilless rifles, those kinds of things, that would be stationed almost permanently there on the firebase, in this case LZ Center. The perimeter of the firebase would consist of bunkers dug into the hillside where a rifle company or actually, yeah, one rifle company would assume responsibility for security of the firebase. There were four rifle companies, Laura. There were four.

LC: Okay. Total of four.
RK: I am mistaken. I am mistaken. There were four rifle companies in a battalion. Alpha, Bravo, Charlie, and Delta companies. Then one rifle company, for example let’s say Alpha Company, was on the hill providing security for the firebase. The other three rifle companies would be out on combat operations. Then one company would come back and the next company would rotate off the hill. So you rotated on and off the hill about every fourteen to fifteen days conducting combat operations. Hope it clarified.

LC: Yes, absolutely. What was LZ Center like? Can you describe the—?
RK: My goodness. It was paradise.
LC: Really? What kind of terrain were you in, Bob?
RK: Well, we were on the top of a hill.
LC: Okay. That’s a good place to be.
RK: We were on top of a hill, but I use paradise kind of tongue-and-cheek because anybody who’s ever lived on a firebase knows that I’m bullshitting.
LC: Yes. You could hear the shock and surprise in my voice. Really?
RK: But compared to being in the field, being shot at, it was—I mean, at least you had hot food and you had a hot shower and a chance to get a haircut and read mail and rest for a few days, two days or three. Life on the firebase was tough. If anyone hearing this has ever seen the movie Platoon then you get some idea of what your bunkers were like. You had a bunker where the commander slept and some of his staff members would sleep, where you had your meetings. The structures were wooden
structures reinforced with a little concrete perhaps and sandbags. You had latrines to
poop and pee in, a mess hall, a barbershop, a medical tent, medical facilities there. It was
a field battalion headquarters and designed to perform that function. At the very top of
the hill would be some structures for command and control and where the battalion
sergeant major and battalion commander and battalion executive officer would sleep,
where their staff officers would sleep. The S-2 and the S-3 officers were typically on the
hill. The S-1 and the S-4 officers were typically in the rear area. So there was an
administrative and logistical function performed at the firebase. Conditions were
wonderful as long as it didn’t rain. When it rained everything was muddy and slippery
and you slipped and slide all over the place and you were constantly wet. The rifle
company that was on the hill for security at any particular time would sleep in the
bunkers on the perimeter of the firebase built-up area. You had to contend with rats.
You had to contend with—because you were on a hill you often got rain and cold
weather, foggy weather, especially in the Central Highlands where we were. So, I mean,
it was cold at night and hot during the day. You had to be prepared for that. But the
upside was that you weren’t being shot at and typically the enemy would not attack a
large firebase like that. At least I can’t recall that LZ Center ever received any significant
attack. We might have been probed from time to time and had some types of skirmishes.
I don’t recall that we ever received any mortar fire. So, I mean, again the upside was that
you could have a hot meal in the mess hall. You could get clean clothes. You could have
a hot shower. You could decompress from the combat operation that you had just come
off of. As commander with my staff I could plan and prepare for the next operation once
we got our orders and the area of operation that we had been assigned to. We could pull
out our maps in a secure place and look at them and plan and have our meetings. So life
on the firebase was not all that unbearable as long as it wasn’t raining, but when it rained
it just got miserable.

LC: Yeah. It sounds like it. You’re in the Central Highlands.

RK: Yes. We are in the Central Highlands, well, somewhat west of the Da Nang
area, but I don’t know how far north. I don’t think we paralleled Da Nang in terms of
latitude, but we were out in that area. Yeah.

LC: Near the A Shau Valley?
RK: I don’t remember. I honestly don’t.
LC: Well, we can look it up because we know the name of the LZ, but was the rest of the battalion—it sounds like the rest of the battalion was essentially based there.
RK: Yes. Yes. All four rifle companies would be based at the firebase—headquarters/headquarters company, some elements of the headquarters/headquarters company would be there at the firebase. The others would be at the rear area. Medical people would be in both locations. Logistical people in both locations. Communications people in both locations, but the rifle companies, when they weren’t on combat operations, the firebase was their house. It was their home. The bunkers were the places where we slept.
LC: Would it be the case, Bob, that you would move out on operations using helicopters?
RK: No. You would walk off. You walked off the firebase.
LC: Okay. So your AO was relatively near?
RK: Yes. Yes.
LC: Possibly near the base.
RK: Yes. I presume that each battalion had a firebase and that they were spaced out geographically so that our areas of operation would butt up against one another so that that particular area however large it was geographically was covered by a particular battalion. Then collectively the battalions and the brigade, the brigade would have an area of operation. Yes. So yeah, I mean a typical combat operation would start early in the morning. Let’s just say for the sake of argument that it’s a Monday. You plan all day Sunday and you try to get your men to get a good night’s rest on Sunday night. You tell them to behave themselves. You wake up Monday morning and you assemble and you form into your platoons and you walk off the firebase in one big long single file. You’re very vulnerable to the enemy at that point.
LC: Absolutely.
RK: Yeah, because there are only a certain number of ways on and off of the firebase. Once you got off of the firebase proper, depending upon the strategy that each particular company commander would devise and, of course, based upon what you have been told by your battalion commander and the S-3 staff. Then you might split into four
different platoons. So each company while on combat operation would have a particular
area that they were responsible for patrolling. So in my case I typically would divide that
area into four locations or four grids. One platoon would go there and a second platoon
would go to the second one and so forth. Then I would choose what platoon I wanted my
command element to move with. So, for example, take a square and try to visualize a
square. You divide that square into four equals. Then 1st Platoon, 2nd Platoon, 3rd
Platoon, 4th Platoon have got each a part of that particular square. Then the responsibility
fell to the platoon leader to make sure that that platoon leader was doing his job.

   LC: Within that area.

RK: Within that particular smaller area. The company commander, the old man,
me at twenty-four, I would travel with a platoon. Then usually about every three or four
days we would get what they called a major resupply. A change of clothes perhaps, a hot
meal, maybe some mail. On a major resupply we would plan for all four platoons to
come together and we would establish a perimeter defense and establish an LZ for
helicopters and we would get a major resupply. Oh, boy, that brings back so many
memories, good ones and bad ones, too. That’ll come up later. Then for example after
spending three days with the 1st Platoon, I would move the command element over to the
2nd Platoon. So we’d be with the 2nd Platoon for a while. Then three or four days later
we’d reunite another major resupply and I might spend some time with the 3rd Platoon or
the 4th Platoon. Then after doing that again for anywhere between ten to twelve days or
so, fourteen days I think was the max, then the company would come back together and
we would come back to the firebase. Now, when we came back to the firebase we were
typically airlifted out. We typically walked off, but we typically got airlifted back. Of
course, that would require security on the ground and the LZ there at the firebase couldn’t
accommodate a large amount of helicopters all at once.

   LC: About how many might they be able to take?

RK: Oh, I don’t know, two or three at a time perhaps. I can’t recall that any of
the firebases were very, very large areas geographically. Maybe the size of a football
field because you’re talking about the top of a mountain that’s been carved out sometimes
perhaps by heavy equipment but most of the time not, and just carved out helter-skelter to
make a semi-permanent home for men.
LC: Would the perimeter also be cleared of vegetation out to a certain sphere?

RK: Yes. We would have established the fields of fire. Yes. Those bunkers were permanent bunkers.

LC: Right. The ones where the guys who had the—

RK: Yeah. They would be—oh, I can’t describe it. The engineers had a word for it. It was the steel plating, but it was curved, almost like a culvert that you’d find on the side of a road. On top then it’d be dug out a little bit underneath that then that curved culvert-type steel would be put on top and then sandbags on top of that and sandbags in front.

LC: A real fortified position?

RK: As fortified as you could get it, yes. Perhaps some wood involved in the fortifications, but then inside that small dugout structure is where the squads lived, where the enlisted men lived. That was tough living, that was tough, because they weren’t waterproof. They were cold and damp at night and hot as hell during the day. They were depressing.

LC: How many guys might be in one of these bunkers? What size?

RK: Oh, I would say, I’m thinking three to four men would share a bunker, maybe less, but I don’t think more than that. There simply wasn’t room. We’re looking at an area perhaps ten, twelve feet deep, maybe, and five, six feet high at the most and maybe six feet across, six, eight feet across.

LC: Wow. That’s close.

RK: Yeah. It was close. It was close quarters. Then from those perimeter bunkers during times of high alert half of them would be awake and half would be asleep or when we were on lower alert status and one person was responsible to be awake and the others could be sleeping or goofing off or doing whatever they wanted to do.

LC: They presumably would have some supplies in there.

RK: Yes. Oh, yes. I mean, they could cook down there. They had their Sterno ovens all built up because it was a community space and yet they respected one another’s community space. You might have four guys from one platoon all members of the same squad in Bravo Company who slept there when they were on the firebase, but when they left the firebase then they would be replaced by four others from Charlie Company. The
people from Charlie Company would not disrespect what had been left behind by Bravo Company because they knew that—

LC: They’d be—yeah.

RK: If there was a Sterno oven there then they would use it. If they broke it somehow they’d repair it, I think. I mean, I never had any real problems as a commander with that type of thing.

LC: Let me just ask, Bob, did you say earlier, and this may not be correct but I’m just wondering, did you say that you don’t really remember LZ Center while you were there taking any kind of rocket or mortar attacks on any kind of basis?

RK: Correct. I don’t recall that during my time at LZ Center we ever came under any sustained attack.

LC: Were there one-offs?

RK: I’m sorry?

LC: Would there be one-offs, like one shell just one night would come in, just kind of a “hello” and you need to stay awake we’re out here kind of thing?

RK: Well, I don’t think so. No.

LC: Not so much?

RK: No.

LC: That’s very interesting.

RK: Indeed in our area of operation our battalion was pretty fortunate. We never sustained any heavy casualties. That’s another one of the memories that I have. I mean, so many American units, Marine units and Army units, suffered such devastating losses. In a particular type of single combat operation a third of your men are decimated, killed. We never had that. We never had that. We never had an incident during my time at the firebase where the enemy was so powerful against us that a particular company was severely damaged. We were blessed by that. Now it may have been that the enemy was not particularly interested in the area surrounding LZ Center. It may have been they had other priorities, but it may have been just sheer luck that I was assigned to that particular battalion and that particular brigade with that particular area, but in all of my combat operations off of LZ Center for the time that I was rifle company commander essentially it was just a walk in the weeds. Now there were times when we came in contact with the
enemy, but we never had a sustained firefight. We were never outnumbered by the
effemy. I can’t think that it ever happened to any of the other rifle companies. So yeah,
we were pretty lucky when compared to other units, as I said.

LC: Absolutely. Let’s take a break there, Bob.

RK: Okay.
Interview with Robert Kreger
Date: February 21, 2006

Laura Calkins: This is Laura Calkins with the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Dr. Robert Kreger. Today is the twenty-first of February 2006. I am in Lubbock and Bob is in California in—where is Cerritos, Bob? Go ahead and tell people.

Robert Kreger: Cerritos College is located in Norwalk. We’re just a few short miles south and east of Los Angeles, downtown Los Angeles.

LC: So you’re between L.A. and San Diego, but closer to L.A.?

RK: Yes.

LC: Closer to heaven then. I mean, since you’re not Navy I can say that.

RK: Far enough away from Camp Pendleton.

LC: That’s right. That’s right. Well, Bob, we have discussed a little bit in an introductory way, an interesting way, about your assignment beginning in 1970 with the Americal Division as a company commander, a rifle company commander. I wonder if you can tell me a little bit about your combat experiences as the commander.

RK: Well, yes. What I’d like to do, I suppose, would be just tell the story of the very first time I went out on combat operations with my company as the commander because the events that happened really, I think, foretold what was going to happen later. Although at the time certainly I didn’t know it, but as I look back on those memories, Laura, it was very pivotal in my evolution as an Army officer. So not long after assuming command of the company and that trip to the hospital, the graves registration area, to view the body of PFC Stroud—by the way I do have in my collection of memories I have an etching of his name from The Wall in Washington, D.C., which I’m very proud of.

LC: Very good.

RK: So not long after that incident it was indeed time for me to go to the firebase and meet all the people on the firebase and prepare for my first combat operation. It was routine. It was a fourteen- or fifteen-day operation, as I recall. We were assigned an area of operation by battalion commander Colonel Saint. The idea of course was to march off...
the firebase as a company and patrol, conduct patrols, in and around this area of operation for X number of days. Then return to the firebase, hopefully, of course, safely and without injuries. I was very anxious for this moment. I can remember very vividly being filled with a sense of “I’ve got to show these men that they can trust me. I’ve got to show these men that I’m skilled and qualified to be the company commander. I’ve got to show the senior NCOs, my platoon sergeants, my field first sergeant, certainly my first sergeant in the rear area—that I’m capable although young. I mean, I had a very real sense of the fact that I was young and a company commander. I took pride in the fact that I was a company commander, but I was very worried that I wouldn’t measure up. So I prepared myself mentally to be tough and to make decisive and correct judgments, and not to dilly-dally around. I have a strong sense that I had to be quick with my decisions and that the decisions certainly had to be right. With that, of course, also a very real sense of the privates and the E-4s and the E-5s who may or may not be on their—well, certainly the privates were on their first tour of duty—and whether they were regular Army or whether they were draftees that really didn’t factor in to my thinking. I had a sense that they were relying on me as their commander to keep them safe and to make the right decisions. So with all that in mind we walked off the hill.

LC: Now, Bob, can I ask you just one question there? Did you as you were kind of compiling this sort of mental brickwork that you talked about so that you would be good whatever the situation was that might arise, did you think that you had enough training? Had you been trained enough to assume command of a company?

RK: Oh, boy. Well, formal training as a company commander, no, because other than—well, I shouldn’t say no. I mean not entirely. Officer candidate school, OCS, a very intense six-month period gives you as much training as they could possibly do in six months. Of course, it’s up to the individual soldier, of course, to respond to that and absorb it and learn, but the other training that I had received, of course, was all Special Forces training which is vastly different than being a line company commander. On the one hand I knew that I was experienced and I knew that I had been under combat fire. I knew essentially how I would react there. I was just hoping that I would react in a way that was successful to my men, if that makes any sense, but I mean I felt prepared. I don’t know that there could have been—perhaps there might have been some type of
orientation program that American divisions could have done for incoming company
commanders. For example, you’re going to be the commander of Bravo Company.
We’re going to send you to Da Nang or Chu Lai or some area for a four-day period on
some of the do’s and don’ts. Perhaps the Army could have built in some type of a
feedback loop from experience that they gave us for seventy-two hours or something like
that then move us out with our companies. But other than that the only training we had
was what we had had prior. I felt confident that I could do it. I was hopeful.

LC: Right. Well, you don’t ever know I guess until you—

RK: No, you never know. That’s the unknown mystery there, of course. Well,
we walked off the firebase and I put the company CP area, the men assigned to the CP.
Again that’s the commander and the radio-telephone operators and the medics and
interpreters and artillery folks—I put those with one platoon. I can’t remember now what
platoon it was, but I do know that the platoon sergeant was a young E-6 by the name of
Dicky Coyne, C-O-Y-N-E. Dicky was on his second tour of duty, I believe, in Vietnam
and he was a fine young man. He had thick, black hair and he was about five-foot-nine
or ten and kind of a wiry sort, but he was a young E-6 who in his first tour of duty had
been with the 101st. So his men all called him the Little Eagle because the Screaming
Eagles is the 101st. He was a fine platoon sergeant. I’m pretty sure he was a platoon
sergeant. He was either a platoon sergeant or he was a hell of a squad leader and my
memory won’t help me there too much. I’m very tempted to say that he was platoon
sergeant as I already have. We were walking along and everything was just normal. I
mean, I was with his platoon and the other three platoons were off doing their thing. We
were all in radio contact and I can’t recall now, Laura, whether it was a first or second
day of our combat operation. It may have been the second day, but it was very early in
the combat operation. The point element of the platoon came under fire. It wasn’t
intense fire at all. It was just a few rounds that were fired at us probably by Viet Cong
or—more than likely Viet Cong although it could have been NVA in the area, who
spotted us walking through the weeds and fired a few shots. Then they took off running.
Well, I hastily tried to get a perimeter set up. I recall getting the men into a defensive
position and I remember that Dicky Coyne came up and said that he was going to chase
down these guys and bring them back or at least go get them. So he grabbed a few of his
men, just a handful, less than ten or so, and together he hastily put together a little
reaction patrol, I suppose you could call it, and took out after these guys. We just sat and
waited and, of course, monitored the radios. A lot of the time a rifle company
commander while he’s out on combat operations just sits and monitors the radio, which
can be terribly exasperating as well. There’s other stories that relate to that time. So
there I sat kind of waiting and wondering what’s going on and in radio contact with the
higher headquarters and letting them know what was happening and so forth. Not a hell
of a lot of time went by. I don’t know, an hour, hour-and-a-half, two hours at the very,
very most, when Dicky came back in to the perimeter area and with him he had a POW.
This was a young enemy soldier and I still don’t know whether the man was NVA or Viet
Cong. By his dress as I remember it was more than likely Viet Cong. He wasn’t dressed
in much of a uniform at all. He didn’t have the pith NVA helmet. He wasn’t outfitted
very well with ammunition pouches and other types of military equipment, but he had
been wounded. He had been wounded in one of his arms. I think it was his left arm.
He’d taken a glancing blow or a bullet wound on his left arm. So we were all convinced,
obviously, that this was one of the guys who had shot at us and Dicky had chased him
down and captured him and brought him back inside the perimeter. Well, as I said
before, I was so filled with anxiety about showing my men that they could have trust and
faith in me I set out stupidly and very, very mistakenly and certainly very stupidly, I set
out to try to interrogate this guy right there on the spot to obtain information from him
about “How many of there were you? Where did they go? Are there others?” Those types
of questions. I wanted to know the information certainly so I could figure out, well,
we’re outnumbered. We’re up against this many. We’re up against a force of two
hundred men or we just encountered four or five guys and we don’t have to worry too
much about it because I felt that I had decisions that I had to make about artillery fire
and/or air support or what the hell we had to do next to avoid anything worse than what
had just happened. So I took the Kit Carson Scout interpreter and began to interrogate
this soldier. He was very hard in that he was not going to respond at all to any of the
questions. I kept asking questions and he kept saying in Vietnamese that he didn’t
understand. “No biet, No biet,” and all that kind of arrogant—well, not arrogant talk—
but just, I don’t know. He wasn’t telling anything. I became angry and I gave him a
pretty roundhouse kick to the head with one of my boots. I landed a pretty good blow
upside the head of this soldier and he went down and it caught me like a ton of bricks,
Laura, that I had just done something very stupid and probably shouldn’t have done it,
but it was done. I can’t take back what had been done. I realized that if there was ever
any hope to get any information from this person that I had just blown it. So with that,
then, I got him on a helicopter as quickly as we could and got him out back to the people
who could do a more proper and perhaps successful interrogation. We went on and
conducted the remainder of our patrol. I’m filled with memories of other types of combat
situations, but I can’t recall. We’ve talked about how the memory can be so fooling. I
don’t remember if it was on this particular operation or others.

LC: It doesn’t matter, Bob, really.
RK: Yeah. I’m going to say that the remainder of this particular combat
operation was routine. I don’t think we had any other enemy encounters. We just kind of
walked around through the weeds for a while and did our patrolling and did our best to
stay out of trouble, did our best to react to whatever we needed to react to and returned to
the firebase without further incident. As I indicated in other interviews as a rifle
company commander, I didn’t lose a lot of men. My element, my units, never came
under a period of time where we were under terribly intense enemy fire and lost a lot of
men. So I can only presume that this particular combat operation was much the same. I
like to use the expression “just a walk in the weeds,” and we came back to the firebase.
Now, this would have been—September, October—this would have been late October or
certainly early November of 1970. What I want to say is that from that period on, it was
just normal operations. We would come back to the firebase and we would decompress
for a while. Sometimes we walked back to the firebase, sometimes we were helicoptered
back to the firebase, but it was just routine business day-in and day-out. You were either
on patrol and doing what you had to do on patrol or we were back on the firebase. That’s
how your life sort of evolved. You fell into that routine. There were times on combat
operation. I remember one time—and again it may have been the very first operation but
I doubt it—where we had a very fitful night. I can’t recall again what platoon I was with
at the time, but we had set up a perimeter, a defense, in the evening and we were sitting
down and we were probed all night. We had enemy trying to break into our perimeter,
again, virtually all night long and none of us got much sleep that night. We were
constantly hearing the trip flares go off. We would fire some fire, some small-arms fire,
in the direction of the trip wires. We could hear a claymore mine go off every now and
then. We would throw hand grenades in the general direction, but it was pitch black
dark. I don’t recall that it was raining, but it was just one of those nights that you wish
you could never remember again because, I mean, I had no idea who or how many of the
enemy were out there. Were we indeed surrounded or not? Was it just a bunch of shit
birds out there trying to cause us some anguish, which they did. We knew that we had
wounded some with either claymore mines or the hand grenades or the small-arms fire
because you could hear the men moaning. So, I mean, if you could hear the men
moaning then they had to be close. I was scared to death. I mean, I was scared for
myself. I was scared for my men. You couldn’t call in artillery because they were right
there next to us. You couldn’t call in an air strike. I suppose looking back on it perhaps I
could have called for some flares, maybe a ship to come in and light up the area a little bit
so we could see what the hell was going on, but I know that we never did that. I never
did that. So I mean, it was just one of those kind of nights where you wish you could
forget it. I don’t know what more to say there. Just operations went that way.
Sometimes you’d go out on a fourteen-, fifteen-day operation and nothing would happen.
Other times it was dreadful, but there was never a time as I said a couple times, there was
never a time where I and my company were utterly surrounded and in desperate,
desperate states. Gosh, so many stories now. As I said, the memories, both good and
bad.

LC: That one that you just told sounds really, really stressful.
RK: Well, it was. It was stressful because—
LC: You’re in charge.
RK: I was in charge and there was such a high degree of unknown.
LC: Yeah. You have no information.
RK: No, I didn’t. If it had been daylight things would have been so much
different, but again the notion of weather and darkness as part of the enemy. That’s why
I think Oliver Stone, for good or ill, does such a marvelous job with the movie *Platoon*
because to my mind he really portrays the elements of weather as part of the enemy and
the mist, the rain, and the mud that people have to crawl through. I mean, it’s tough to
fight a battle in the mud. When the enemy fires at you, you can’t call timeout and say,
“Wait a minute, I don’t have my boots on yet. Let me put my boots on,” or “Wait a
minute, let me get to where it’s dry.” If you’ve been sleeping and you’re sleeping in your
shorts and your boots or something and the enemy shoots at you you’ve got to get up and
fight in what you’re wearing. You don’t have time to make it polite and make it pretty.
These are some of the stories that I try to convey to my students here at the college is
when that shit happens you have to fight with what you’ve got.

LC: Right. Whatever it is.

RK: Yeah, whatever it is. So that’s why you do have to be prepared at all times
and that’s why when you let your guard down whether through drunkenness or whether
through stupidity of some sort you’re very vulnerable. Until a soldier learns that, until I
learned that, you’re walking around with a loaded pistol to your own head, perhaps.


RK: It was during this time that as a rifle company commander, and I assumed
command there, like I said, in October – October, November, December, January,
February, March, April. I was probably the rifle company commander for Bravo
Company for seven to eight months or so. It was during that time that my life changed.
It really did, as I look back on it. I don’t know where we want to start with that kind of
dialogue here this morning. It was during that time that Colonel Saint recommended me
to become General Mataxis’s aide. I was ever so proud of that. I remember that he
called me on the radio and said, “I need to come out to the field and pull you out. Get
you back to the rear, get your clean fatigues, and get your boots shined up a little bit,
Kreger, cause you’re being interviewed by General Mataxis, Brigadier General Mataxis,
to be his aide.” And I thought, “Damn, general’s aide? Wow. That’s kind of nice.” I
didn’t know much about being a general’s aide. I kind of thought it was sort of a cushy
kind of job, obviously, but I reacted, I said, “Gee, I’m a rough-and-tumble company
commander. Do I want to be a pussy foot sort of general’s aide sort of yes man to a
general? Then I thought, well, it’s safe. You’re not in combat a hell of a lot and kind of
prestigious.” So I felt honored that Colonel Saint had recommended me. I assume he
did. I don’t know who else would have done so. I remember going back to the rear area
and sprucing up and being interviewed. I remember how cordial I thought that General Mataxis was at the time. He was brigadier general and a pretty down-to-earth sort of guy. I was impressed. I remember that he said that he was on his way to Phnom Penh in Cambodia for assignment and that if I did take the position, if it was offered to me and take the position, that I would have to extend overseas for a couple three months before I would be allowed to go back to America. I remember saying, “No, sir. With all due respect, sir, I want to go home.” So that probably shot myself in the foot there for never being General Mataxis’s aide.

LC: Bob, what kind of impression did you form of the general?

RK: Oh, very favorable. Gosh. He was physically fit. He was not an imposing man in terms of size, but he was the first general officer that I had had very close contact with, at least that kind of contact. I’d seen other general officers, obviously, and been around them from time to time, but he was quite something. I would have to say that I certainly viewed him as a professional soldier, almost like a father figure—someone to look up to and see his accomplishments. I didn’t know anything of the man and his military background. I just knew that he must have done something right because he was a brigadier general and they were about to send him to Cambodia presumably for an important assignment.

LC: Did he tell you anything about what his work would be?

RK: No, he did not. No he did not. I didn’t ask.

LC: Right, and that would have been not probably a good thing.

RK: Yeah. I could fill in my position, “Well, what are you going to be doing over there, sir?”

LC: Yeah. Make me an offer.

RK: Yeah. But I came away from the interview realizing that I probably was not going to be his aide because of what I had said about extending.

LC: Now was this, Bob, did this come out of thin air for you, your response?

RK: Yes. Yeah.

LC: Did you know that you didn’t want to—because in a sense, you’re kind of making a decision about your career here in some ways?
RK: Yes, yes it did, Laura. I mean, I—see, there were other things going on as well.
LC: I believe you.
RK: Yeah. There were other things going on as well. Gosh, where to start with those things? Because as I said that time as a rifle company commander and especially the last part of my second tour was so traumatic for me emotionally that I sometimes wonder how I did survive it. The things I did and the danger I put myself in were just astonishingly stupid.
LC: Well, Bob, you said something before about when you had that young man who was a POW in front of you and you were very aware that, of course, all of your subordinate officers were watching you and that you did something stupid. You used that word before. Was it because—why was it stupid? Was it because it was counterproductive or because it set the wrong tone?
RK: Well, both. Both. The notion was if I kick this guy he’s going to talk. If I kick this guy my men will see how rough and tough I am and that I’m out for their best welfare. I’m going to get the information that we need right now and we’re all going to be fine. By kicking him I did completely the opposite. Now, I don’t know that I did completely the opposite in terms of my men and what—
LC: Were you ever able to assess that or did anybody ever say—
LC: “Yo, captain! Good job,” or something like that?
RK: No. No. None of that. None of that on the spot. It all came later. It all came later in a very negative way. Now, to get to that story if I can—
LC: You do it however you want to do it, Bob.
RK: Okay. Well, there’s a couple stories that I think are interesting to tell, too, because—
LC: Sure.
RK: Oh, gosh. There’s so many, Laura. I don’t know where to begin.
LC: Well, pick a couple and they don’t have to be in any kind of order. We’ll be able to sort that out later.
RK: The things I learned as a rifle company commander have stuck with me of course the remainder of my life as they always will, but the whole notion of—oh, gosh, my brain is just swirling right now.

LC: Want to take a break for a second?

RK: Yeah. Let’s take a break.

LC: Go ahead Bob.

RK: Well, what I’d like to do is try to recount a few stories of my experience as a rifle company commander that served to grow me up even more and certainly have stayed with me. The first is a happy thing that happened. It was Christmas. This would have been my second Christmas away from home in Vietnam, but now this time I’m a rifle company commander and I’ve got the entire company with me. We’re walking through the weeds as a unit. I remember that the terrain was rather flat and there was a river flowing through a part of our area of operation. As was the military practice during a holiday, if war ever takes a holiday. It’s kind of ludicrous—

LC: Sort of an oxymoron.

RK: Yeah. Yeah, in the first place. Well, there was a seventy-two hour truce that was imposed. During the seventy-two hour truce U.S. forces were not supposed to take combat operations offensively. We could establish defensive perimeters and you sort of hunkered down. You could conduct defensive patrols near your area to make sure that you weren’t being crept up on. Supposedly of course the enemy is doing the same thing. The enemy is relaxing for a seventy-two hour period. I don’t know what the hell they ever did. So I remember that we—I brought my company in and we cordoned off a small portion of this river so that the river [flowed] right through the center of our defensive perimeter. So that small river created for us a place to bathe, a place to brush our teeth, a place to get naked and play in the water, to inflate—I remember we had such fun for forty-eight hours. The guys, I mean, we had people on defensive perimeter, of course, but we rotated that. We all had a chance to take a bath. We all had a chance to write letters and read mail. We got pogie bait from home. It was one of the most wonderful Christmases. I certainly wasn’t in America. I wasn’t with my family, but I was with that family at that time and we were safe. It was a wonderful experience. I remember the guys we would take our shoelaces from our boots and tie them together so
that we could create a long string maybe—oh, gosh—maybe six-eight feet long if enough
shoelaces could be tied together. We’d blow up our air mattresses. We tie one end of the
shoelace string to the air sprocket thing that you blew up and tie the other end to a big
rock and sink the rock in the river and just lay there naked looking up in this clear blue
sky, you know, and just having a marvelous time. Just no cares no worries. I remember
that the brigade surgeon, who was a rotund man to begin with, he came flying in on some
helicopters to give us Christmas meal. Most of the guys are half-naked in the river and
here comes helicopters over the top of us with the brigade surgeon dressed up like Santa
Claus and a few of the nurses dressed up like elves. They bring us a hot meal, a
Christmas dinner, in the mermite cans. We put our boots on and some of us put on shorts
and some of us didn’t put on shorts. We just walked through the chow line, got our food,
went and ate. I don’t know why this notion of nakedness, but maybe it was just an idea
that we could take off all of the trappings of war and get rid of them for a few hours. It
was a wonderful experience. We had a grand, fun time together. Water fights in the river
and all kinds of really crazy, childish things. We literally had a very good time, I think. I
remember the meal, turkey and potatoes and dressing, milk, cold milk for crying out loud.
We got cold milk. Oh, God, it was wonderful. Now, once that seventy-two hour period
was up then, of course, we had to get back to the business of being on alert. We left that
area. We did get ambushed, but it was just a small deal and we reacted to that. So
evidently while we were relaxing by the river the enemy was getting ready for us to move
in that particular direction. It was a wonderful time and I’ll always remember. It was
one of the good things that happened to me as a rifle company commander. A chance to
bond with the men a little bit more, if I can use that phrase. It’s kind of cliché, but—it
was great. Now, of course, there were other times when it wasn’t as good as that. I
remember, and this is kind of a tough story. It was also during my time as a rifle
company commander that—now, every ninety days a rifle company was allowed to go
back to the rear area for what they called a stand down. This would be a seventy-two-
hour period where you were back on the east coast of Vietnam up against the South
China Sea. You had a seventy-two-hour period of R&R. We called it I&I, intercourse
and intoxication. That’s where you did all the drugs that you needed to do. You screwed
everything that looked at you twice and got drunk as a skunk and went to floor shows and
things like that because you knew the moment that the helicopters picked you up to take
you out of the field and back to your stand down area where you could party, you also
knew that the clock was ticking and soon those very same helicopters would come in and
pick you up and take you back to the firebase where you would go back into combat.
These stand down periods were very intense emotional periods. Oh, gosh. There are
those other stories, too. But it was during my time as a rifle company commander where
I lost my first of six legs. I’d like to tell that story briefly because it just means so much
to me, but there are others as well. Boy, they’re stacking up now.

LC: Well, as long as you don’t forget any of them.
RK: Well, I’ll try not to.
LC: You tell the ones that you’d like to do.
RK: It begins with General Westmoreland and the relaxation. It begins even
before that, Laura, even before that. Let me go backwards. I got to go backwards a little
bit. There was one occasion where we came off of a combat operation. This is an
important story to tell for all those who may hear. We were airlifted back by helicopter
to the firebase. I think I was in the second lift of helicopters—I can’t remember exactly
when—but my soldiers were coming back and getting off the helicopters and moving into
their bunkers and going about their business. I landed and I got out of my helicopter, and
I could see—gosh, how can I say—I could see that the—oh, gosh, now there’s even
another story. I’m out of order now, but that’s all right. I could see that the command
sergeant major of our battalion was harassing my soldiers as they got off the helicopters.
Now, these men had been out in the field for fourteen, fifteen days. Although it hadn’t
been an intense combat experience there’s always those tensions. I could see that the
command sergeant major—and by now we have a brand new battalion commander.
Sadly, a lot of the lieutenant colonels who assumed command of rifle battalions were not
qualified. This was the case with this man, at least in my opinion now. The battalion
commander now was a guy by the name of Lee Roberts. I believe he was an engineer
officer, lieutenant colonel, who was getting his ticket punched. He was serving his six
months or so as a command position so that he could fulfill a requirement to possibly be
promoted to full colonel. In my view he was just ineffectual as hell. By now Colonel
Saint had come and gone. I don’t know what assignment he received secondly, but he
may even have come back to America. I’m not sure exactly what happened to him. But
together we had this engineer colonel, lieutenant colonel, running the firebase as battalion
commander and his command sergeant major, who was a dumpy guy—I can visualize
him now. I mean he was 5’8” or 9”, not much taller than I was at the time. He was
pretty grossly overweight. Here’s this chubby little round guy running around on the
firebase. As my men are getting off the helicopters he’s screaming at them to get a
damned haircut. I walked up to him and got in his face and I said to him, “Top! God
damn it! Leave my men alone! They know your rules. They know they’ve got to get a
haircut when they come back to the firebase. For Christ’s sake we just come off combat
operation. Give them an hour. Give them two hours. They’ll get their hair cuts.” I
thought to myself, what in the hell is going on? Here’s this battalion command sergeant
major telling my men to get a haircut. It begins with how discipline began to fall apart
between lieutenant colonels, colonels, senior majors, the field grade officers who had
come from an era prior to this relaxation of discipline that was occurring in the Army at
the time and how young soldiers and company grade officers who—I mean the company
grade officers, us captains and us lieutenants. We were between a rock and a hard place
because certainly we had to obey orders from our superiors, but we had to be sympathetic
to our soldiers. We had heard rumors that there was beer available in the barracks. “Oh,
my God! Unheard of that a soldier in basic training or AIT could drink a beer in the
barracks. What the hell is happening to discipline and how are they bringing that sort of
discipline over here to Vietnam? Are they going to listen to what we say? How’s that
going to affect our combat operations?” All these things were swirling through our
heads? Here’s this God darn command sergeant major screaming at my guys to get a
haircut. Well, I got in his face and he pretty well backed down because he realized that
he might have overstepped his boundaries. He gave me a nice crisp salute and said that
he would stop doing it, but he reminded me that the men had to get their haircuts. I
reminded him that my soldiers would get a haircut. Well, the upshot of the whole damn
story is, Laura, that a couple, three hours later I’m in the bunker, the command bunker,
with my senior NCOs and the lieutenants. We’re sitting around drinking a beer and
relaxing and being glad we’re back on the firebase when all of a second here comes
Colonel Roberts literally nearly dragging one of my E05s. He’s a young man by the
name of Hart, H-A-R-T. Sergeant Hart was his name. A fine young soldier. He’s got this guy by the scruff of the neck and he’s dragging him up into the command CP. He says to me, “God damn it, Captain Kreger! Do you allow your men to walk around my firebase with hair down their ass like this?” I just knew, God, I just knew, Laura, what the hell was going to happen. I looked at the colonel and I said, “No, sir. Of course I don’t, sir. I have told Sergeant Hart that he needs the haircut.” I said, “Sergeant Hart is aware that he’s going on R&R to Hawaii. I have told Sergeant Hart that he has to have his mustache trimmed and get a haircut or they’re not even going to let him get on an airplane in Cam Ranh Bay to go visit his wife in Hawaii.” “That’s not God damn good enough!” he says to me. “I demand that you give this man a direct order.” Oh, God. So I knew what the hell—so now I’m between a rock and a hard place. So I get up from my bunk—oh, God, this is tough to say—and I assume the position of attention. I said to Sergeant Hart, “Sergeant Hart, my name is Captain Robert Kreger. I am your direct superior commissioned officer and I hereby give you a direct order to get a haircut. Failure to do so will result in punishment under Article 89 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Sergeant Hart, do you understand this warning?” Sergeant Hart, bless his heart, he said, “Yes, sir, I do.” He saluted me, did an about face, went down to his hooch, got drunk, smoked a couple joints, came back and tried to frag me.

LC: By doing what?
RK: Well, he had a hand grenade in his hand and as he came back into the command CP—I don’t know if he had ever gone through with it or not, but he had the damn hand grenade in his hand. As he came through and entered into the CP, my senior NCOs saw it before I did. They got him. They tackled him and pounced on him and held him and took the hand grenade away from him. I just felt so helpless. I mean, I knew that Sergeant Hart had done something wrong, but I knew that it was probably out of his control. He’d been humiliated. He’d been made to grovel in front of the company commander and the battalion commander all because of a damned haircut. He probably simply hadn’t had time to get his hair cut. I can’t think that Sergeant Hart would not have trimmed up his hair and his mustache before he left to see his wife. He was not a stupid man. He would have done so. He knew he had to, but by his actions and by the position that I had been put in by the colonel I just felt, like I said, I felt angry at the
Army. I didn’t feel angry at Hart at all. I was just pissed off with this whole situation. I could’ve just spit. So together we took Sergeant Hart up to the battalion commander’s hooch, his area, the CP up there on top of the firebase. We marched him in and we paraded Sergeant Hart in front of him with the hand grenade and we said, “There!” I said to this colonel, I said, “There! There’s your goddamn haircut, sir!” That was the beginning of my downfall. That was the beginning of my rebellion. Another incident, we were back on stand down on the coast. Well, it’s actually kind of a comical story. There’s two quick stories here, perhaps. How are we doing? Oh, we’re doing all right.

LC: Yeah, we’re fine.

RK: Back on stand down. Actually this is kind of a telling story, but it’s interesting. We’re back on stand down and it was the end of a particularly uproarious day. We’d all been drinking all day long and playing football in the sand and having a wonderful time and relaxing. I was in my bunk getting ready to try to go to sleep that night. The battalion executive officer—he was an African-American. His name was Holland, H-O-L-L-A-N-D. He was a rough son-of-a-bitch. Oh! Major Holland was a tough dude. He was stocky, muscular soldier. He was a tough nut. I didn’t like him at all. I didn’t like him at all and he didn’t like me at all because he already knew about the Sergeant Hart incident. He knew that I had been sassy with the colonel. So my reputation as a respectful, obedient company commander had already been tarnished at that point. I think I’m getting these in the right order. I’m hoping I am. Holland comes up to me with a bag full, a little sandwich bag, a little baggy sandwich bag, full of marijuana cigarettes. He says to me, “Captain Kreger, we discovered these on one of your soldiers here. We want you to hold these in the company safe overnight until we can prosecute this young man in the morning.” I said, “All right, sir. Yes, sir. I’ll take them to the other room right now and put them in the company safe. Yes, sir. Will do, sir.” I said, “By the way sir, did you count these?” He said, “No, we didn’t bother to count them.” I said, “Thank you, sir!” So I took three or four out of the bag before I took them to put the rest of them in the company safe and stripped down nearly naked and walked out into the beach and lay down in the water and the soft waves coming in off the South China Sea and smoked myself into oblivion that night. Thankful that I had those and that I could just lay there and let all my cares and worries leave my head. Somehow
stumbled back and slept the night and got ready for what was going to happen the next
day when the helicopters came in and took us back to the firebase. It may have been that
very stand down or perhaps another stand down—I had to press charges against a soldier
for attempted murder. There was tremendous racial disharmony going on. I don’t know
whether I told the story of the conscientious objector who shot another soldier?

LC: No.

RK: I had that happen. I had a Hispanic soldier who came to the firebase. I can’t
recall his name now. He reported in to me as they were all supposed to do. He
proclaimed that he was a CO at that time. I said, “Well, you know you’ve got seventy-
two hours for your paperwork to process. If your paperwork is approved I’ll send you
back to the rear area and you can be the company clerk. You can be a mailman. You can
be a driver, a mechanic, whatever you want to do when you get back to the rear area, but
you won’t be in combat.” He promptly went down to his hooch where he was staying.
Got drunk, smoked a few joints, and got into a quarrel with one of his squad members
who used the term “hijo de punta” and called his mother a son-of-a-bitch. The kid picked
up an M-16 and put three rounds in his chest and killed him right on the spot. That pretty
well did away with his conscientious objector status and he went to jail. I had a black
soldier try to kill another black soldier with a six-foot engineer stake—tried to ram a six
foot engineer stake through this other soldier’s chest. There was all kinds of these racial
incidences which were occurring. It was something that we had to deal with. We walked
on eggshells. There were stories of black soldiers killing white officers and all kinds of
things that just were undermining, undermining the whole discipline, the whole unity, of
an American effort against the communist enemy. We were not only, in my view now
after all these years—we were simply not fighting the enemy. We were fighting
ourselves as well and we were losing terribly the battle with ourselves. Discipline was
terrible. Drugs were rampant all over the place. Everything was affected. Everything
was affected. Your ability to be a commander, the morale of the soldiers—it was a
dreadful situation. I’m kind of off the subject. Sergeant Hart, when we took Sergeant
Hart up, he had to be sent—instead of getting home to his wife he went to jail. Had to
press charges against him for attempted murder. You hated doing that and, gosh, I guess
you kind of had to. I mean, I don’t know what else to say.
LC: Did you have to attend any kind of sessions or an inquiry?
RK: No. I never had to do that. I don’t know why I never had to do that, but I
never had to be pulled out of the rear and made part of any of those sort of legal
proceedings.
LC: Do you know what happened to Sergeant Hart or where he was sent?
RK: No, I don’t. No, I don’t.
LC: Did the MPs (military police) show up? Were MPs called in?
RK: Not to my knowledge. Not to my knowledge. But these were incidences
which I remember. Again, the notion here, Laura, is that I mean we were just
disintegrating. We were disintegrating from within as a cohesive fighting force with a
particular purpose. We were disintegrating from within while the enemy was not. While
we were losing strength, I think the enemy was gaining strength of character. The
American rifle companies were falling apart, I think, because of all these things
happening. This split between the field-grade officers and the company-grade officers,
the split between company-grade officers and the junior soldiers. Your E-6s and your E-
7s and the lieutenants and the captains kind of formed one age cohort group. The
privates and the younger NCOs formed the second cohort group. The senior NCOs and
the senior officers were a third age cohort group. We were all pulling in different
directions. We were not united in our effort toward discipline and in our effort toward
winning and our effort toward getting along with one another so that we could
accomplish the military mission. To kind of end this—well, there’s a couple other
stories. There’s just so damn many right now but—I was wondering this morning as I
showered how many were going to come flooding back. Now I’m overwhelmed, but it
was during this time that the second, if you will, straw on the camel’s back happened.
LC: The first one being Sergeant Hart.
RK: The first one for me was the Sergeant Hart incident and understanding—
well, actually, I guess it would be the first one was when I kicked the soldier and realized
I’d made a boo-boo. Then came after that having to deal with the Sergeant Hart incident.
Now we’re on the firebase and we’re getting ready to walk off the firebase to go back out
on combat operation. Another E-5 sergeant of mine, squad leader, Michael Crawford
was his name. He was a long, tall drink of water, a black soldier, who came to me and
said, “Sir, I’ve had enough. I don’t want anymore of this combat stuff and I’m [not]
walking off. I’m not going to walk off the hill tomorrow when we walk off.”

LC: He was an E-5?

RK: He was an E-5. I said to him, “Sergeant Crawford, you know that you can’t
do that and if you don’t leave tomorrow with the remainder of the company as you are
directed to do I will have no choice but to put in the papers,” which meant that I would
start court martial proceedings, some type of judicial punishment. He simply looked at
me and said, “Sir, you do what you’ve got to do and I’m going to do what I got to do.”

With that he just turned and walked out. Well, the following morning he did not
accompany the troops off the hill. So when it came to my attention that he was not with
his platoon I radioed back to the firebase and I told the first sergeant to start the
paperwork processing. He said, “Yes, sir. Will do,” and so forth. He began to process
those papers. Colonel Saint was still my battalion commander at that time. That’s why I
know this particular story is a little bit out of order.

LC: That’s fine.

RK: Colonel Saint radioed me. Now we were out in the field for a couple, three
days. Colonel Saint radioed me and he said—Colonel Saint and I had this kind of unique
bond. He didn’t call me Captain Kreger, he called me Bob, which was unusual for him to
call me by my first name. But he said in the clear on the radio, he said, “Bob, I need to
talk to you. This is important. Set up an LZ I’m coming out to talk with you.” I said,
“Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Of course.” So I stopped. We set up a hasty LZ. I remember the
terrain was somewhat mountainous, but there was a flat area not too far, so we moved
there and set up an LZ. Colonel Saint came out and got off the helicopter and he walked
up to me. I saluted and he returned the salute. He put his arm around my shoulder. This
is tough. He put his arm around my shoulder and he walked me away from the men so
that he could talk privately with me. I thought, “What the fuck is going on?” He looked
at me dead in the eye and he said, “Bob, did you ever kick a soldier?” I said, “No, I
never kicked anybody.” Then I thought and I thought, Laura, and hell I said, “Yes, sir.”
I said, “God,” I said, “Yeah. November—first combat operation—hell, four or five
months ago, sir, I kicked a soldier.” He said, “Well, Sergeant Crawford took a picture of
you kicking the soldier to the division commander. The division commander, General
Baldwin, wants to see you. You’re being given an Article 15.” I tell you, Laura, my
world just collapsed. My world just went right into the damn toilet. Here I had been in
my view as loyal to the Army as I could be. Here I had been as loyal to the men as I
could be leading them in combat with only minimum casualties, doing what I thought
was right. Now, of all people, me, I’m going to get a division-level Article 15 in front of
a major general, the division commander, James Baldwin, for kicking a soldier, which
was a violation of the Geneva Code of Conduct for POWs. I didn’t know what to do. I
did not know how to react. I just felt lost. I felt lost. I felt abandoned, I felt betrayed. I
felt helpless. I knew that Colonel Saint had probably done all he could do to prevent the
inevitable, but once the papers were filed against Sergeant Crawford, he pulled out this
photo and went somehow to the division commander and made the division commander
aware of the photo. That got that ball rolling, which was never to stop until it hit me.
Now, they say that if you carry this anger through your life it’s going to eat you up inside.
It has. For thirty some years it ate me alive. Not knowing—now, was there—how can I
say this in a politically correct way—was there a black conspiracy in my company
against white officers? Was there a black conspiracy among all black soldiers in Vietnam
against their officers? Was there some type of an internal defense organization that
would take this photograph and keep it on file, presumably some place and like pulling
out the ace of spades when you needed that ace in the hole card, pull out that card, that
get out of jail Monopoly get out of jail card free. That’s precisely what happened. At
some point when Sergeant Crawford knew that he was going to be disciplined for what
he had decided to do, he pulled out his ace, his hole card, and got me in trouble, while
Sergeant Crawford, to my knowledge, received an early out and went home from
Vietnam a month or so early. I’m saying to myself, “Son-of-a-bitch!” You know? Like
I said there I was and it has plagued me all these years. I would like perhaps someday to
be able to talk with Sgt. Michael Crawford. First of all, I want to say that I would forgive
him for what he did, but I want him to know how devastated I was by his actions and how
it served to really hurt me deeply that one of my soldiers would betray me that way,
regardless of the racial issues, regardless that I’m white and he was black. I don’t know
that that even factored in. I’m hoping that it did not, but I can’t help but think that it may
have. But that I would be betrayed after my service, my dedication, to these men to keep
them alive that he would do that to me. I got a division, a goddamn division-level Article 15. I was fined two-hundred dollars that went into my records. I was told at the time that it would remain in my records for one year after which it would be taken out of my records, but I thought “Why me?” Why does this have to happen to me? I was so filled with anger that from that moment on my time as a rifle company commander was certainly measured and not very effective as a rifle company commander. I don’t know exactly what happened to Sergeant Crawford other than the fact that I did hear, as I said, that he got an early release and went home. I don’t know that he was ever disciplined at all. I do know that I was disciplined and felt terrible about it. I know that Colonel Saint stopped being the battalion commander and Col. Lee Roberts took over, which only compounded things. I do know that in came this new Major Holland that I disliked very much. I do know that I began to drink excessively when I was not on combat operation. It was during that time that the marijuana incident happened that I just related earlier with Major Holland and the baggie. I became extremely rebellious. I mean, I was as rebellious to my battalion commander as any captain had probably ever been in Vietnam. I certainly got what I deserved in the long run. Gosh, where to go from that. It was during this time also that I lost—the first time—three of my soldiers lost both of their legs, so I lost a total of six legs. I saw the best and I saw the worst. Another tough story, but I want to get through this one here this morning. It was during this time as well that General Westmoreland had begun to authorize two-week leaves for soldiers going back to America. So I was gonna go back to America and be with my family and friends. I can’t remember exactly the timeframe here, Laura. It might come to me, but I remember being in the rear area and getting ready to fly to Cam Ranh Bay and wherever else I had to go to fly home to America to visit with my family. No, no. I was in Da Nang. I was in Da Nang at the time. The battalion had moved up to the Da Nang area by now. I received a radio message that two of my soldiers had been wounded, one severely, one moderately, and that they were on their way to the 95th Evac hospital across Da Nang and that I should get there. So I remember getting in a jeep and traveling across Da Nang to the 95th Evac hospital. I remember entering in to the hospital area. The one soldier who was most severely wounded, Larry Flurry was his name, F-L-U-R-R-Y. A wonderful, wonderful man. God damn. He had already been pre-op’ed and he was already in
surgery at the time. So there was nothing I could do for him. The other soldier I spent
some time with. He had been peppered by a claymore—what had happened was Larry
had gone out in the morning to retrieve a claymore mine that he had set up the night
before. Larry was an experienced E-5 soldier. He’d been in Vietnam quite some time.
Somehow he walked into his own booby trap and the claymore mine detonated. He was
very severely wounded and the other boy had received a lot of shrapnel from the
claymore mine in his chest area. I remember sitting with him. I cannot remember that
soldier’s name for the life of me. I’ve tried and tried to rack my memory, but I can’t.
LC: It’s okay.
RK: I comforted him the best I could and then they came and got him and they
put him into surgery. I remember, Laura, waiting like an expected father would wait for
the birth of a child in the recovery room area of the hospital. I remember that the nurses
were ever so kind to me. They kept asking me if I wanted coffee and soda and cigarettes.
I had stopped smoking, so I didn’t want any cigarettes, but I was damn sure tempted. I
remember just being so filled with anticipation of what was going to happen. I remember
that a nurse came to me and said, “Flurry is out of surgery. You can see him in recovery
now.” I remember looking down at the soldier, Laura, and seeing the stumps where his
legs had been. Both legs had been amputated above the knee. The bandages were there.
Of course, his face was still matted with blood because they have to save the life. They
can’t clean you up at that time. They clean you up later and his hair was all mussed with
blood and his face had spatters of blood on it. His fatigue uniform top was still on but
kind of shredded a little bit, I recall. I just recall staring down at his stumps. The image
of that is never going to leave me. Larry became conscious for a short while and bless
his heart. He looked up at me. He said to me, “Sir,” and he had the presence of mind to
call me sir, for God’s sake. He said, “Sir, what about my legs?” I honestly felt at that
moment that someone surely had said to him that he would lose his legs, but I just calmly
and somewhat coldly looked back at him. I said to him, “Larry, you know that you lost
them both.” By his reaction I came to realize that I had just been the first person to tell
him that he no longer had legs. He looked up at me and he said, “I want you to tell my
mom and dad. I don’t want the Army to tell them, sir. I know you’re going home on
leave. I want you to tell my mom and dad.” I swear, Laura, I didn’t know what to do. I
felt a tremendous sense of responsibility to do that for him. I also knew that there were policies and procedures that had to be followed by the Army rules and regulations of notification because while I was at Ft. Bragg in the interim I had served as a survivor assistance officer for a time and had to make notifications. So I was aware of that policy and those procedures which would soon be implemented. I went to the colonel at the 95th Evac Hospital. I don’t know if he was the senior officer or not, but I remember going to him and begging for twelve hours of advanced time so that I could have twelve hours head start. I remember that he said to me, “Captain, I’ll give you twelve hours. That’s all I’m going to give you is twelve hours.” So the next day I flew home to America. I remember arriving at Lindbergh Field in San Diego. My mother and father, my sister, my nephews, my wife, my children, my brother was all—everybody was there. As they were—boy, this is tough—as they were filled with happiness at me being home for two weeks I simply said, “I’ve got something I have to do. I can’t be happy now. I’ve got something I have to do.” I said that to my father most, but I believe everyone probably heard me at the time because I certainly was anything but jubilant at being home. We drove to my home and I remember sitting down in the dining room area where we had the telephone. I called this boy’s father. He was from a small town in Alabama. Such a small town that I don’t think they even had a telephone. I believe, if my memory is correct, that he had to come to a general store kind of a setup to talk on the telephone to me. I sat there on this telephone. My eyes were just—I was just crying and crying and crying. I told his father what a wonderful soldier his son had been, how brave he was, and that he was on his way to Japan. That he would be coming home soon. He would be coming home to the love of his family and that his family would have to learn to love him in a different way. I’m sorry. It’s tough. I’m crying then, as I am again now, and my dad is across the table from me. My dad is just bawling his eyes out. We got off—I told him that I was going to be in America for the next two weeks and that if they had any questions at all, if I could be of any help at all, just please call me. I hung up the phone. My dad walked around the kitchen table. He embraced me. He said, “That’s the bravest thing that I’ve ever seen any man ever do.” That was the beginning of the healing that had to take place between my dad and I. I was like a wet noodle. I was just distraught and the telephone rang and both of us, in this awkward moment, the telephone rang.
dad answered the phone and handed the phone to me immediately and there was Larry
Flurry’s mother. She said to me. She said, “Captain Kreger.” I said, “Yes, ma’am?”
“My husband has just told me what has happened to my son.” I said, “Yes, ma’am.” She
said, “I have a question.” I said, “Yes, ma’am?” She said, “Can you tell me if the
explosion blew my son’s legs off or did the doctors remove my son’s legs?” I remember
thinking, Laura, what a strange question. I remember that I did not know because Larry
was already in surgery prior to my arrival at the 95th Evac. I said to her, “Mrs. Flurry, I
don’t know, but I don’t believe that it makes any difference now, does it?” She simply
said, “No. I don’t believe that it does. Thank you very much. Good bye.” She hung up
the phone. Those words will be with my memory for the rest of me. Now, after all this
time I’m looking back, Laura, and I’m somewhat getting back to normal here this
morning. I remember perhaps that was only the type of a question that a mother would
think of to ask. I lost complete contact with Larry Flurry for a long, long, long, long
time, but I was reunited with him by the telephone, oh, gosh, about ten years or so ago,
perhaps. In my quest, it began some time ago. Of course, there’s another story that leads
to, but in my quest to try to bring some closure to these events of my life, like I said, I
would like to have the opportunity to visit with Michael Crawford. I’d certainly like to
know what ever happened to Sergeant Hart. I was interested to know what had happened
to Larry Flurry. I was able to get a telephone number to contact him vis-à-vis some
friends in the 196th Infantry Brigade. Because he is a wounded veteran he has a certain
amount of privacy that is afforded to him. I had to get permission to initiate contact with
him. I got that contact. I got that permission to do so. I can’t recall how that happened
exactly, but I remember talking with him on the telephone. What a wonderful glorious
experience it was. He led a full and happy life. He returned to his home in Alabama. He
returned to his love of farming. He was a farmer, a successful farmer, in Alabama. He
married. He raised a family. He had a grandchild that he was proud of. He still to that
day, some twenty-five years later, called me “sir” on the telephone. He had no anger in
his voice at all. I’m thinking to myself, “God if I had lost both my legs how bitter would
I be? How angry would I be for the rest of my life?” He taught me such a wonderful
lesson that you just got to move on. And now I’m losing it again. He just—I said to him,
“Larry, well, do you regret anything?” “No, sir. Not a bit. Not a bit, sir. Don’t regret a
thing, sir. I would do it all again if I had to, sir.” With that we parted company and we
said our goodbyes. I’ve not talked with him again since that moment, but what a
wonderful experience that was for me to reunite and to get from him some courage, get
from him some strength to say to me, “All right, Kreger. Get on with your life. Come
on. Quit living in the past and move forward. You’re doing all right now.” By then I
was back in education. By then I was making a career as an educator and making some
important decisions and changes in my life, but Larry just served to teach me a very
important lesson. I don’t know. That was just a very important time toward the moving
away from that a little bit. Toward the end of my two-week leave there in America was
when I actually came down with malaria and perhaps I can tell that story. We could be
done perhaps in a decent time.

LC: How about if we just hold that one for next time?

RK: Oh, okay.
Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University continuing the oral history interview with Dr. Robert Kreger. Today is the seventh of March 2006. I am in Lubbock and Bob is speaking from California. Good morning, Bob.

Robert Kreger: Good morning, Laura.

LC: Bob, last time we spoke you mentioned *en passant* that you had a brief TDY assignment while you were at Ft. Bragg. I wonder if you can tell me anything more about what “survivor assistance” meant and what you were detailed to do.

RK: Well, sure. As an officer there at Ft. Bragg and assigned to the JFK Center for Special Warfare there, a rotating duty that all of the officers were assigned—well, I presume all of the officers were assigned to from time to time—was to act as either a survivor assistance officer or a survivor notification. They did at that time make a distinction between the two, which was kind of interesting to me. I didn’t know anything of the organization of how they did that, but the duty came to me for, I believe it was a ninety-day period or perhaps just sixty days to be a survivor assistance officer if I was needed. So there was a brief period of training I remember at the Center for Special Warfare, one of the classrooms there, where the SAOs (survivor assistance officer) were all gathered. We got a briefing of sorts from officers and NCOs about the do’s and the don’ts and our duties primarily of being a survivor assistance officer. Essentially, of course, there was a question-and-answer period. Then we were just on our own and we went about our daily lives and daily activities. This was during the time that I was the commander of that B team that we spoke of earlier where we were involved in the Gabriel Demonstrations. My daily activities revolved around the B team and the Gabriel activities, the preparation for those things. During my time as an SAO I only had to make one visit. Well, it was beneficial to me certainly in a very personal way is that I was not the officer who made the notification. I came second. I came only upon request of the family, which I think was kind of interesting, too. The way it worked, of course, if
a service man died then a notification officer would be sent to the house and make
notification of the death of that particular serviceman.

LC: Now would those be officers as well?
RK: Yes.

LC: Would they be in a pool like the SAO people?
RK: I presume they would be, yes, and perhaps with only a small amount of
training.

LC: I’m sure that’s probably right.
RK: Yeah. There wasn’t a whole hell lot of emphasis then in 1966, ’68, in that
era, of sensitivity. It wasn’t the cultural thing that we were—but, of course, it was a very
sensitive thing to do. I’m sure that the notification officers did receive training and
assistance in how to be sensitive to these issues. But for me, I’m not implying that I
wasn’t sensitive, but my job was to come in and help the family with anything and
everything that the family needed help with.

LC: They would make a request?
RK: They would ask Ft. Bragg for a survivor assistance officer, yes. Typically
this happened either the same day or perhaps a day or two after the notification officer
had been to the house to make the notification. Of course, it takes time for those types of
tragic things to sink in and then the family may react by requesting an SAO. As I said a
moment ago, I only had to go out on one case and it was less than—how can I say it? I
don’t want to seem insensitive, but I was shocked with the callousness and cavalier
nature of the family that had just been told that their service member had died.

LC: Really?
RK: Yes. It shocked me. God, I don’t want to get into racial matters, but this
was a black soldier who was an E-7. He was a Special Forces soldier in Panama. This
had nothing at all to do with Vietnam.

LC: So was he killed in action?
RK: No. He died of cirrhosis of the liver from alcoholism in Panama while on
active duty and his family was glad to see him go. When I arrived at the house they were
practically having a party!

LC: Yikes. How bizarre that must have been for you.
RK: Yes. It was a bizarre situation for me. That was a good choice of words. I offered my help. I sat with the hardly-grieving widow for a while. Her concerns were all economic in nature. She needed very little else from Ft. Bragg or certainly from me other than advice on how to get the survivors benefits. When I gave her all the knowledge that I had I excused myself and left and I never saw the family again. So my experience with that, perhaps, is valuable in that it might represent something out of the ordinary.

LC: That’s exactly why it’s valuable. Yeah. Absolutely.

RK: But every officer did—I mean as far as I know every officer there—it was probably a unit. I’m sure, like for example, the 82nd Airborne Division or any of the other American divisions all would rotate that notification and assistance duty among their officers. So that’s how I got involved in it at Ft. Bragg there, but again that was my one and only experience with it.

LC: Right. Now would officers to your knowledge, Bob, get pulled into one of the two pools? They would receive training in one of the two areas and then that would be what they might be called upon to do?

RK: Yeah.

LC: In other words, there wasn’t much overlap between survivor assistance and the notification folks?

RK: As far as I know, Laura, there wasn’t a great deal of overlap. You were either one or the other. Yeah.

LC: Well, I think that’s helpful in clarifying at least the organization of it and the fact that people are funny.

RK: Well, indeed people are funny and you never did know, of course. Often times the survivor assistance officers might not have known the circumstances of the death of the service member unless they pursue it. Now, in my case I did want to know so I made sure that I knew the cause of death before I got to the family. When I found out that the man had died of a disease rather than a combat wound and that he had been a member of the—I think he was in Panama. It might’ve been the 8th Group I think that was in Panama. I said, “Well, this is not a combat death.” I don’t remember saying consciously, “This should be easier rather than more difficult emotionally for everyone concerned.” But like I said as I approached the house I could hear chatter and laughter.
Before I ever got to the front door I realized this was kind of an odd situation going on in here. The house was full of people. It was full of people. They were fixing to have a party.

LC: Maybe that’s a New Orleans thing or something. I don’t know.

RK: Yeah.

LC: At any rate, it’s an interesting experience and I think helps also to tell people how these notifications and then how they were organizing them, what the Army did in order to prepare to help families as well.

RK: I remember simply making a very simple report to follow up on my actions and sort of CYA (cover your ass) and submitted my paperwork to the people that needed it. Again as part of the pool I never again had to be involved in it.

LC: Well, let’s pick up, Bob, with the story in the chronological order in which we’ve been kind of going through it. We’re in the middle of your second term and you had come home. You had told about having to call the family and speak to both the father and mother of Larry Flurry. Tell me about the rest of your leave. What developed after that?

RK: Well, the rest of my leave was going normally—visiting, of course, with family and friends and enjoying being home and so forth. I guess just a normal leave that a serviceman would have.

LC: Now this was all in California.

RK: This was in Lemon Grove, California, yeah, my home, yes, and seeing old high school friends and doing those kinds of crazy things. About two-and-a-half or three days before I was scheduled to return to Vietnam, I became quite sick with what I thought was the flu or I had flu-like symptoms. My wife, Barbara, was a registered nurse. Of course, my two children were there with me. She suspected something, but she wasn’t telling me what she suspected, which I can’t quite figure out yet, but she’s smart enough to keep the children away from me. So I kind of laid around in bed. I remember that our home was small, relatively speaking, and that Barbara—my mother and father had made arrangements for Barbara and I and the two children to all stay in their bedroom. So I remember lying in my parents’ bed and just feeling miserable but not
understanding why. I’m kind of saying to myself, “Why the hell am I going to get the flu here on my leave for crying out loud?”

LC: Yeah. Something unfair about this.

RK: Yeah. So I mustered up some strength and I went to the drug store, pharmacy, where I worked as a delivery boy before I went in the Army. I spoke to the pharmacist and told him what was going on and described my symptoms. Under the counter he gave me a couple, three pills. He said, “Here take these things. These’ll help you eliminate some of these symptoms that you’re having.” So I took them and sure enough I began to feel a little bit better but it was a very temporary feeling of relief and within a day or so once again I was pretty sick. My dad had been in the Navy so he suggested that we go down to the Balboa Navy Hospital down in San Diego. I said, “You know, Dad, that’s not a damn bad idea. Let’s go.”

LC: So you must have been feeling really sick to be thinking about going to the hospital.

RK: Yeah. Yeah. So we went down to Balboa Hospital. Now this would have been the day before—yeah—either the day before or immediately two days before I was scheduled to leave Lindbergh Field, San Diego, flying back to Vietnam. It was the damnedest thing, Laura, because I went into the Navy hospital there. They checked me—I said, “Look. I’m a captain in the Army. I’m home on leave from Vietnam. I don’t feel good. Something’s wrong.” They tested me for everything under the sun except malaria. What a bunch of bo-bos. Ultimately at the end of the day of being poked and prodded and pinched and bled and all these kinds of things all day long, I remember the guy says to me, this Navy doctor says, “Well, we don’t know what’s wrong with you. We think you have URI.” It’s this upper respiratory infection.

LC: That’s very non-specific.

RK: Yeah.

LC: You probably could have told him that.

RK: Yeah. I didn’t have the words then to say, “Tell me something I don’t know.” I looked at him and I said, “Well, at the very least can you admit me to the hospital here for a day or two? I’m scheduled to go back to Vietnam. I haven’t been able to see my kids. My wife won’t let them in the room. Can you at least allow me to stay in
the hospital a couple days so that people can visit me under a controlled situation?”
Because all I wanted was a little bit more human contact. All I wanted was an
opportunity to see people again and visit with them before I knew I was gonna go back to
Vietnam. He says, “No. No. Our beds are needed for much more critical patients.
You’ll have to leave.” So I thought, “Son-of-a-bitch.” Well, I left the hospital and
then—

LC: You had lots of kind things to say about the Navy.
RK: Oh, yeah, I did. (Laughs) I left the hospital. I forgot a little bit of the story.
The thing that my dad knew where I was sick was I couldn’t eat his barbecued Cornish
game hens.

LC: That was the trigger.
RK: That was the trigger. When I told him that I was too sick to eat his special,
barbecued Cornish game hens he knew his son was sick and it was time to go to the
hospital.

LC: Emergency room.
RK: Yeah. We’re talking red lights and flashing sirens all the way, flashing
lights and blaring all the way to the hospital. He knew. Anyway, so he brought me back
to the house. I just told everybody, “Well, I don’t know what’s wrong. They tell me I
got to go back to Vietnam tomorrow.” So I began to pack. We said our goodbyes. I got
on the airplane the next morning and off I went. Well, from San Diego up to San
Francisco everything seemed to be fine. I remember—now would I—I can’t remember
whether I flew out of San Francisco. Yeah, must have been Travis. When I flew out of
Travis Air Force Base en route to Vietnam, my temperature began to spike. I recall that I
was really doing badly. One of the stewardess on the airplane recognized that I was in
distress and asked me what was going on. I said, “I wish I could tell you what’s going
on. I don’t know. I’ve got a very high fever and I don’t feel well.” She had a
thermometer. She took my temperature. It was a 104.5. She said, “You come with me.”
So she brought me back near the galley of the aircraft and made another soldier sit in my
seat. She kept me back there. She kept a moist towel on my head and ice and things like
that. She was ever so kind. She did her very best to keep me under control. I wish I
could remember her name or her face, but it’s just one of those things. Ultimately, I fell
asleep. I’m making a long story here, but I did fall asleep. I slept right through Tripler
Army Hospital there in Hawaii. If I’d have been smart, Laura, son-of-a-bitch, if I’d have
been smart I would have woken up, I would have gotten off the plane in Hawaii and I
could have stayed in Hawaii for thirty days, but no! I’ve got to sleep right through
Hawaii and I end up in Saigon.

LC: How sick are you feeling by the time you get there?
RK: Well, by the time I get to Saigon I’m feeling somewhat better.
LC: Is that right? Okay.
RK: Yeah. The fever had abated a little bit. I had enough strength to gather my
stuff and get off the aircraft. I got into a barracks, transit officers quarters, barracks. In
fact, I went out and had a couple drinks that night with another warrant officer that I
befriended in the barracks there, woke up the next morning and here’s where the story
gets good. I woke up the next morning and I went down into the latrine area to shave and
I fainted, passed out, and nearly cut my chin open on the damn sink as I went down. A
couple guys found me, got me upstairs into my bunk. I laid there for a while and barely
had any strength.

LC: Go ahead Bob.
RK: Okay. I must’ve—when I went downstairs to shave there in the morning
after the night, the next thing I know I’m on the floor of the latrine and I had cut my chin
not real badly, but bad enough to have a little blood. So apparently I must’ve passed out.
On the way down maybe banged my chin, underneath my chin there, on the sink. A
couple guys found me and got me up to my feet and got me back upstairs to my bunk
there in the transit officer’s quarters. I laid there for a short while trying to gather my
thoughts and figure out what the hell I was gonna do next. Making a long story
somewhat short I finally convinced someone that I should go to an aid station. They took
me across to one of the Air Force brigade or Air Force aid stations there at probably Tan
Son Nhut in Saigon where I sat unattended for what seemed like an eternity to me.
Laura, I just got more pissed and more pissed. I could feel that my body was not doing
well. I mean, I didn’t know that I was in the throes of some full-blown very serious
malaria, but I knew things weren’t right with me.

LC: Getting worse?
RK: Getting worse quickly.

LC: That’s a frightening feeling, really.

RK: No one was giving me a damn bit of attention. So I began to get very irate and a lot of profanity and a lot of disrespect to Air Force personnel. At one point, obviously, they got full of me and they called the MPs. The next thing you know to the aid station where—I’m kind of in like a doctor’s waiting room area. I’m outside in this area and I’m just ranting and raving and pacing back and forth and cussing and everything else. Here come a couple big strapping MPs, Army MPs, and ask a couple questions of the Air Force personnel who direct them to this irate crazy lunatic captain over there in the corner. They come over and they grab me and put me in a jeep. So now I’m going across Saigon to the 3rd Field Hospital. When they found out that I was Army rather than Air Force, I guess the Air Force wanted to wash their hands of me as quickly as they could. So they called the MPs. The MPs are now taking me to the 3rd Field Hospital in Saigon.

LC: Now they knew enough that you were clearly sick.

RK: Yes. Yeah. I think they came there specifically to take me to another hospital rather than to take me into a jail situation.

LC: Right. Dump you at Long Binh or somewhere. Right. Okay.

RK: Yeah. I swear I’ll never forget this moment in my life. It was clearly one of the turning points. If there was somebody I could find and congratulate and thank, it would be this Army doctor. If you can imagine a scene right out of MASH with those push-open sort of stainless steel doors, I had an MP on either side of me. I’m in the middle. I’m very weak. I can walk, but not real good, but I’m walking. The MPs are flanking me on left and right and they’re sort of supporting me and also subduing me at the same time just as a precaution. The three of us walked through those doors side by side. There was an Army captain doctor in his whites about twelve feet away with a clipboard in his hand. I remember this ever so vividly. He was just doing routine paperwork on another patient, filling out a form or something. He heard the commotion and the three of us come through the doors. He whirled around and he pointed his finger at me. He said, “That man’s got malaria. Get him upstairs right now.” He saved my life. That doctor’s instinctive reaction at that moment really did save my life. I don’t know
what it was about his intuition or his observation, but he just looked at me. He looked at
the physical condition of me at that moment. He said, “That man’s got malaria. Get him
upstairs right now.” So upstairs I went to the infectious ward of the 3rd Field Hospital.
That began my recovery. It was a tough time. I did nearly die. At first they tried to
pump in the quinine with the big horse pills that they used to give you. I couldn’t keep
those down. I kept vomiting those up. The fever had not broke. So they plugged an IV
(intravenous) into both arms, one into my left and one into my right arm. I laid in that
damn bed for seventy-two hours with those IVs pumping into me. About every hour,
every hour-and-twenty minutes or so, a staff of nurses would come in—and this was
quite comical also. The nurses were ever—oh, God. They were so wonderful and such
gracious people. They put up with all the crap that they had to put up with with folks like
me. But they would come in. Together one of them—two of them helping me, two of
them, one on each IV bottle on those little push sort of stands that they could hang the IV
bottle on and push it along the floor.

LC: Oh, yeah. Sure.

RK: So myself—five of us would go in and take a cold shower just to help break
the fever. Then we’d come out and they’d dry me off and put me back in the bed. I
presume they went and got dried off and went about their duties. That routinely
happened. Finally and fortunately, of course, obviously the fever did break and the
medicine began to kick in. I began to recover from the malaria. I recall one time the
doctor came in. He and I were talking. I asked him. I said, “Well, tell me more about
malaria and how close was I?” So he explained a little bit more about the different types
of malaria. Apparently according to him I had gotten falciparum malaria, which is fatal.
If not caught it’s fatal.

LC: What is it called again, Bob?

RK: It’s called falciparum, F-A-L-C-I-P-R-U-M or something like that,
falciparum.

LC: What’s—?

RK: The other strain is vivax. Now vivax apparently is the type of malaria which
is non-fatal, but will recur within a person’s system.

LC: Yes. Over many, many years.
RK: Over many years. Falciparum apparently does not. If you get it and you 
live you’ll never get it again.

LC: Well, there’s some comfort in there, I suppose.

RK: There’s some comfort in that, yes. (Laughs)

LC: Not much.

RK: A little, but some. I ask him. I said, “Well, how close was I?” He said, 
“Well, it’s hard to say.” By then he and I were pretty good pals. He said, “You know, 
Captain.” He said, “I would say a matter of hours, four to six hours. Maybe if we hadn’t 
catched you by four to six hours it might have been fatal for you.” I know that this guy 
really did save my life. Like I said at the beginning, if I could somehow find this kid or 
this man I would surely thank him for that.

LC: No idea what his name was?

RK: No. I have no idea what his name was at all.

LC: What was his rank? Do you remember? Was he a major?

RK: I believe he was probably a major. He was probably—I can’t recall. I really 
don’t know. So that was the end of that. I stayed there at the 3rd Field Hospital for a few 
days and was discharged from the 3rd Field Hospital and made my way back to Cam 
Ranh Bay. They had an R&R center, or a recovery center, there at Cam Ranh Bay set up 
for people recovering from injuries and sicknesses such as myself. I spent about thirty 
days at Cam Ranh Bay. It was during this time that I saw myself on TV.

LC: Oh, right.

RK: The other story there of The Selling of the Pentagon documentary from 
CBS. After the recovery period, I was thinking back to—Colonel Saint was still the 
battalion commander. I recall how generous and kind he was to me, too. I was still the 
Bravo Company commander. I’m not—I really don’t even know to this day who may 
have taken over as the commander. It was probably one of my platoon leaders was doing 
it. But, shit, I don’t know.

LC: Presumably someone had to let them know where you were because—

RK: Yes. Yes. Colonel Saint was in touch with me and was very concerned for 
my health and gave me all the time that I needed to gain the strength back, and asked me 
quite bluntly if I wanted to continue as the company commander or would I prefer a
different assignment. I said, “No. I’ll be the company commander. Get my strength
back and so forth.” I left Cam Ranh Bay and went back to the LZ, LZ Center there, and
the firebase. I spent a couple more days on the firebase and then I rejoined my company.
It was at about that time that Colonel Saint was reassigned. Colonel Roberts came in.
Laura, as I said it was about that time that my personal life, my professional life as a
soldier began to spiral downward pretty rapidly.

LC: Well, Bob, let me stop you there for a minute and just ask. Colonel Saint
had said to you apparently, “Would you prefer to go somewhere else?” He may have
been and I don’t know—was he offering you a desk job somewhere?

RK: Probably so. Yes. He was probably saying to me, “Look, let’s put you back
in the rear area as adjutant once again or the intelligence officer, S-2 or S-4 officer.” He
was probably doing that. He did not come out specifically and offer me a different
assignment.

LC: Your sense was that that’s where he would go?

RK: My sense was that, yes. The words were, “You have an opportunity to leave
combat and do something else if you want to do it.”

LC: Why did you choose what you chose? Do you know?

RK: Oh, gosh. A good question. Loyalty to the men, certainly. Feeling a sense of
responsibility to fulfill what I had started as a rifle company commander. I certainly
didn’t miss being in combat, but at the same time having said that, Laura, it was—how
can I say it—it was less macho to have a desk job than it was to be in the field as a
company commander. There was certainly more glory to be had as a company
commander, so perhaps part of my personality was saying this is more exciting. I
didn’t—I had my full strength back and I had fully recovered from the malaria. So I
didn’t have any concern about not being able to perform. Now, I must also interject that
earlier and unknown to anybody in the unit—well, I should say not anybody, but
unknown to my commanders, unknown to Colonel Saint or anybody above me at all, I
had injured my right knee. I had torn the anterior cruciate ligament in my right knee and
had been hobbling around in the field as a company commander for quite some time, less
than a hundred percent physically.

LC: This had not been treated at all.
RK: No. It had not been treated at all. I kept it completely quiet because it was kind of embarrassing the way it happened and embarrassing and yet comical at the same time. Myself and a few other members of the company, we took it upon ourselves to go out and set up a night ambush. We suspected that there was some enemy activity in a village nearby where we were laagered. It was just a normal old Bravo Company patrol, nothing spectacular. I got a wild hair up my butt one night. I said, “Let’s go over there and set up a night ambush against this little hooch area.” So I took a few volunteers and guys who wanted to do it. We started—of course, now the whole purpose of a night ambush is to be quiet and not let anybody know where the hell you are.

LC: Right.

RK: So we’re moving along through the tree line and getting closer to the outskirts of this little village area. It was a little hooch area. When stupidly and innocently, but certainly very stupidly, myself and the other guys—we had about seven guys. If we’d have been—we shouldn’t have been doing what we were doing in the first place. It was like a police officer not having back up. Here we were out on our own in potentially very dangerous situations doing stupid things. Well, we walked between a cow and her brand new calf, water buffalo. This momma cow water buffalo had just thrown this calf and was—I don’t know. Maybe the baby calf was clearly less than a couple, three hours old. We walked in between this cow and her calf and she bolted. This cow began to run us down like a football player gets knocked down by a linebacker trying to come through the line of scrimmage.

LC: Just running along and then boom!

RK: Running along. It was like a rodeo cowboy thing. Here’s five or six GIs running around trying to be quiet, mind you, trying to dodge this rampaging damn buffalo’s horns. We couldn’t fire at the water buffalo and kill her, although we wanted to.

LC: Yes. Probably, yeah.

RK: To kill a water buffalo was a one-thousand-dollar fine because they were such an important part of the Vietnamese economy if you were caught killing a water buffalo. But moreover if we fired our weapons then everybody in the world would know where the hell we were. The whole purpose of our little escapade would have been
defeated anyway. So we’re silently—it’s like the Keystone damn Cops. We’re trying to
dodge into the hedgerows and trying to dodge around behind buildings. This water
buffalo is—she clipped me and just knocked me up in the air and down I came. That’s
when I ripped the ligament in my knee. I’m not about to tell Colonel Saint that I can no
longer be the company commander ‘cause I screwed up my knee by a water buffalo.


RK: Cow injury, Purple Heart please.

LC: Yeah, I know.

RK: So I kept that quiet. It’s a long story, but—

LC: Did it actually tear your ACL (anterior cruciate ligament)?

RK: Oh, yes, it really did. Yes. I mean, I have a ten percent disability on it right
now. You know, thirty years later I’m still hobbled by it to some degree.

LC: Golly. That’s—

RK: Yeah. She really did. She just tore that ACL just as sure as if I’d been a
professional football player or a basketball player.

LC: At a much lower price.

RK: Yeah.

LC: Gosh, Bob, that’s a hell of a story.

RK: Yeah.

LC: What about the other guys? Were any of them also hurt?

RK: Nobody else was injured, just the commander.

LC: Just the company commander.

RK: Just the company commander.

LC: How lucky can you get?

RK: Yeah. The one least in a position to afford being a jerk. Why does shit
always happen to me?

LC: Yeah, pretty much.

RK: So anyway. Now I’m back at the firebase—

LC: Well, first, how did you guys get away from her? Now you’re laying limp
on the ground, right?

RK: Well, yeah.
LC: She probably got bored.
RK: She tired of trying to chase us down.
LC: Went back to her calf.
RK: Went back to the calf and started doing motherly things with the calf. We got the hell out of there as quickly as we could. Of course, a couple guys held me up. I’m laying on the ground with my knee. By the time I got back to the perimeter area it had already begun to swell. I knew I was in deep do-do. So I just—
LC: Did you see a medic?
RK: No. I saw the company medic and got some pain pills from him and things to try to eliminate some of the pain that was associated with it, but I wasn’t about to tell anybody.
LC: No trying to draw the fluid off or anything?
RK: No. Nothing like that. I just gutted it out. It was two months later. It was two months later before I ever even saw a doctor.
LC: You are such a Green Beret.
RK: With a thick head.
LC: Yeah. Wow.
RK: Not much common sense. Yeah. It was a couple months later before I finally said to myself, “Maybe next time I’m back in the rear area I’ll go see a doc.” I did. He examined my knee. He said, “You have chondromalacia.” I said, “What the hell is that?” He said, “Well, it seems to me as if you have a degeneration of the patella.” I said, “Oh, okay.” He said, “That’s incurable.” I said, “Oh, thanks a lot.” It wasn’t until—actually it wasn’t until I was discharged from the Army in ’72 that I had a complete and thorough diagnosis of my knee. It was determined at that time that—
LC: You kind of came clean, I suppose.
RK: Well, to some degree.
LC: There was this—“Have you done anything to your knee, Bob?”
RK: Huh?
LC: I mean, you know they always say, “Well, did you do anything?”
said—I tell the story and just keep it down. I’ll be damned it was classified as service
connected.

LC: That’s why you were there.

RK: That’s why I was—yeah.

LC: Wow. That’s a really pretty awful story, though, really.

RK: It’s just one of them silly things that happens.

LC: You’re permanent. You have a permanent problem as a result of it.

RK: Well, yes, but I don’t want to make it out to seem—I’ve lived a very athletic
life since Vietnam. I’ve had some troubles with my knee from time to time and, yes, it
still will pop out on me every now and then, but it hasn’t—

LC: It hasn’t kept you from—

RK: No. It hasn’t kept me from playing sports and learning to water ski and a
variety of different types of other things. But, you know—gosh, I’m kind of way off the
subject now, but I remember water skiing. My knee went out. If I hadn’t had a life vest
on—I’m bobbing in the damn water like a cork ‘cause I can’t move. My friends are
swirling around in the boat in Iowa.

LC: Probably laughing their—

RK: Oh, laughing their asses off of course. Here I am bobbing around in the
water like a cork screaming, “Help! Help! My knee!”

LC: Right. They’re like, “Yeah. Yeah. Whatever.” Drive the boat off for a
little while. Come back later. Yeah. I’ve seen that kind of thing happen.

RK: I came back to the firebase and resumed duties with the company. To be
honest, at this point as I said my recollection of things gets fuzzy because I know things
were happening to me very rapidly. I’ve used the expression “a downward spiral.”

LC: You listed off a number of things that happened on our last session, Bob, that
I don’t know the exact sequence and maybe you don’t either, but here’s some of the
things that you’ve said already. You can elaborate or not. I remember you said that you
had some trouble with the new commanders and you were also—you had some men who
were injured. This would be after Larry Flurry, I think. There were some other losses in
your command which, of course, is not going to be easy for any commander to accept.
Were most of the problems that began to develop, do you think, caused by the fact that it’s now what, 1971, and this is a different war from your first tour in some ways?

RK: Oh, absolutely, Laura. You’re absolutely right.

LC: I mean, Bob’s a different man, but this is also a later and different time.

RK: What a wonderful way you have of just bringing me back to what I was searching for. Yes. All these things were happening. The impact of what I thought was the betrayal from Sergeant Crawford and the incident with the kicking of the Vietnamese soldier. The impact, of course, of Larry Flurry losing his legs and then Jim Petritus was the next boy that lost both his legs. I’d like to tell that story in a moment or three.

LC: That’d be great, yes.

RK: Having had malaria, losing Colonel Saint who I really admired as a commander and getting these other two, the other commander and his command sergeant major that I just didn’t respect at all. Major Holland—these people weren’t bad people, I just didn’t like them and they didn’t like me. It wasn’t their fault that they didn’t like me. It was my fault.

LC: What was the basis of it? Was it that you were acting out?

RK: I was just rebellious as hell. After just a short time—yeah, I mean, I need to put it in context, Laura. After just a short time back as the company commander, Colonel Saint was reassigned. In comes Colonel Roberts. The friction started right away. I told the story of the man with the haircuts, Sergeant Hart, with the haircut.

LC: How bad that—that got really bad.

RK: This breakdown the discipline which was occurring. It was—I don’t know how to say it without—I didn’t like the situation any more than I was in. Feeling unable to do much about it. Whenever I had the chance, whenever I was back in the rear area back in Da Nang I got so damn drunk. I did things that no person should do in a drunken state that I’m not proud of at all. When Vietnam memories come into my consciousness these are things that I’m as a human being now all these years later I desperately regret, but I did them. I did them stupidly. I did them angrily.

LC: Did you hurt yourself?

RK: No. No. I hurt others. Well, I don’t know. Like I can tell you a story, but I’ll get to that in a moment. So very quickly Colonel Roberts and I had this
confrontation. Of course, I’m a captain. I’m a rebellious captain. He’s lieutenant colonel and, after all, he still is the battalion commander. So I was reassigned to the rear area and became the battalion logistics officer. I became the battalion S-4 officer.

LC: Now some people would say that’s not such a bad assignment.

RK: Well, I didn’t like it.

LC: At battalion level staff officer.

RK: I didn’t like it because—well, I didn’t like it because of the conditions under which I had got it which, of course again, were brought about by my own behavior.

LC: It’s kind of soured the trip in a way.

RK: Yeah. I knew that for the last three or four months of my second tour, three months certainly, I would be the battalion S-4. I’d be in a staff position. It didn’t occur to me that I would be out of combat and safe. It didn’t occur to me that this might be an opportunity to do good things. It just occurred to me that here was another distasteful thing that was happening to me.

LC: Was it a punishment?

RK: Well, I might’ve thought of it that way, yes. That’s a good word to use. I may have misconstrued it as a punishment. Indeed it might have been a punishment that Colonel Roberts knew he couldn’t get rid of me, but he could certainly reassign me and get me out of being a company commander.

LC: Did he have any sense of how much you on some level certainly valued that? I mean, you had given up the chance to be reassigned to a staff position.

RK: No. I don’t think he did.

LC: Probably not. He probably didn’t know you that well.

RK: No. Other things were happening. My wife had stopped writing me letters. I had no contact with her at all any longer. I didn’t know what was going on with her. I didn’t know what was going on with my children.

LC: Had you left it that way when you were—I mean, you’d just been home.

RK: No. No. When I left to come back the second trip, our marriage was less than perfect, but I didn’t get the impression that the marriage was over at all.

LC: But she just stopped communicating?
RK: She stopped communicating with me. I don’t know if she was involved with other men. That was another large nail in my coffin emotionally.

LC: You were jealous or—?

RK: It wasn’t that I was jealous. I was lost. I felt a failure. I didn’t know what I was going do next.

LC: I could see that. If you don’t know what’s going on—

RK: Well, yeah. Let me kind of go backwards a little bit in time. Before—actually Colonel Roberts wasn’t the commander. Before I was reassigned back to the rear area as the battalion 4, I would like to tell the story of Jim Petritus and how courageous a soldier he was.

LC: Yes, please. Okay.

RK: The irony of it, Laura, and for those who will listen in the future, the absolute absurdity of this situation. In ’71, late middle of ’71, late ’71 and early ’72 as President Nixon and Henry Kissinger were positioning the United States politically during the Paris peace talks, the rules of engagement were changed such that American combat soldiers were not supposed to fire at the enemy if ambushed unless we could identify positively that the enemy had weapons. If we were fired upon and there were eight or ten enemy soldiers that we could see and yet only three of them had a weapon we were supposed to fire only at the three. As a rifle company commander I thought this was just absurd. How am I expected to keep my men alive if they can’t fire their weapons? So my instructions to my men were, “I’ll take the heat. I’m the commander. We’re gonna keep our weapons on rock-and-roll. When we get fired on we’re gonna return fire with everything and anything that moves.” So that was another thing that was playing on my mind. As you mentioned a few moments ago, the whole concept of how the war was being fought was changing and changing quickly. Jim Petritus was one of these absolute loyal, wonderful American soldiers. I believe he was a Spec 4. I can’t remember his rank, but he had been walking point for, oh gosh, seven, eight months and had been doing a hell of a good job. He had survived all that time.

LC: Tell me about him a little bit as a person. What did you know about him?

Where was he from? How old?
RK: I don’t know where he was from. He struck me as a rural boy. He wasn’t a city boy, I don’t believe. Oh, 5’8” 5’7” maybe. Strong as an ox, 140, 150 pounds.

LC: Was he a young guy?

RK: Yeah. He was a young boy. He was, oh boy, twenty or so.

LC: Smart?

RK: Smart, seemed to be very smart. Yeah. He was probably—these questions make me feel somewhat I should know more about him. Probably a draftee—I don’t think he was regular Army. Here he was in Vietnam and he was just doing the damn best job he could. He was doing a damn good job of it.

LC: What about his attitude?

RK: Oh, wonderful attitude, positive as hell. Loyal, never gave any of his commanders and NCOs a moment of grief.

LC: He was one of the good guys?

RK: Yeah. All around good guys. Well, we’re out in the field, Laura. He comes to me one night and he says, “You know, sir,” he says, “I’m kind of tired walking point. Do you think maybe I could stop walking point?” I said, “Oh, Jimmy, hell yes. Of course.” I said, “God, you’ve been walking point for so long. You’ve been doing such a great job. Yeah. Yeah. You’re done. You don’t have to walk point anymore. Look, I want you to take the first helicopter out tomorrow morning, first bird we get, first Charlie Charlie bird, first mail bird. Any kind of bird comes in I want you on that bird. You go back to the rear area and you can do whatever you want. Tell first sergeant to make you the clerk or I don’t care what you do. Just spend the rest of the time back in the rear area.” “Great, sir. Sounds wonderful. Thanks very much.” Off he goes. The next morning the last day of his combat experience in Vietnam, this kid, this marvelous kid is walking to the helicopter to get out and he hits a booby trap. He was—oh, hell, Laura. He was fifty feet from safety. Fifty feet from the rest of his wonderful life and he hit a booby trap and lost both his legs. Oh, God. It was just devastating. I heard the explosion. I jump up. I’m running. I run down to where this thing has happened. The helicopter—it’s not a Medevac helicopter. So when it saw the explosion it lifted off and got out of there ‘cause it didn’t know what was going on. My medic panicked and he was doing a piss-ass job of trying to give this kid morphine to ease the pain. Jim’s got—
well, what’s left of his left leg is just dangling by a couple of ligaments. There’s hardly
anything down there at all. The right leg is gone completely below the knee. You
couldn’t even find enough of it to put in the bag. The medic, son-of-a-bitch, he panics.
So I grab the morphine from the medic. I pump Jim up full of morphine as best I could.
I got the God damn radio telephone. I’m cussing ‘cause I’m so mad.

LC: That’s okay.
RK: I got the radio telephone operator to get on the radio and get a Medevac in.
I’m on the radio. I’m trying to deal with these two Medevac companies and apparently
Jim Petritus had been injured on the border between two Medevac units. They were
trying to decide whose blasted responsibility it was to come get this young man. I’m on
the ground screaming into the radio, “For Christ’s sake, you guys! Just somebody get off
your ass and get down here! Get this man out of here!” Anyway, it seemed like an
eternity. It was probably every bit of twenty-five to thirty minutes before they finally
responded and got somebody in.

LC: How many calls did you have to make?
RK: Oh, I had to make five, six, seven calls easily.
LC: So back and forth to both of the two units?
RK: Back and forth to both of these companies trying to decide which one of
them was gonna come in and get this kid.

LC: Did you issue them an order? As much as you could?
RK: Yeah. I probably did along with all of the other cuss words I was screaming
at them.

LC: “This is Gen. Robert Kreger giving—”
RK: Yeah. “This is God. You get down here right now and get this kid out of
here. I don’t care what border we’re on and all this stuff, what grid coordinates we’re at
and all that crap. We’re popping smoke and I want somebody.” Well, in the midst of all
this, Laura, in the midst of all this, Jim Petritus says to me. Now I swear these words will
never—he says to me, “Sir, let me take a look at those legs.” I said, “Jim, they’re gone.
There’s nothing to look at.” “Oh, shit. No. Let me look at them. Let me look at them,
sir. Get around behind me and push me up.” I thought, “Oh Christ. Now what?” “Now
come on, sir, I want to look at my legs.” I said, “Oh God damn, Jim, there’s—” “No
come on, sir.” So I got behind him and I raised him up by pushing on the back of his
shoulders and pushed him up from the torso so he could look down. His arms—this kid
was amazing. The courage these boys had. The guts these kids had. He’s got his arms
folded across his chest, Laura. He looks down. His right leg, like I said, is gone below
the knee. It’s just a bleeding stump. The left leg, I mean he had a foot down there, but it
was just attached by a tendon that was connecting the bone to the ligament. He says to
me, “Well, shit. I don’t think I’m gonna walk on those anymore. Okay, sir. You can lay
me back down.” I said, “Okay.” I laid him back down, propped his head up on the steel
helmet. He said, “Anybody got a cigarette.” I said, “Yeah.” We got him a cigarette. I
had stopped smoking, but that’s where I started again. Together he and I shared a
cigarette together until the helicopters could come in and get him out of there. Never saw
him again. Never saw him again. I just tell that story to illustrate where this type of
courage comes from. Where does this type of ability to not just go completely crazy? I
mean, I would only pray that I would have that inside my system if I’m injured that badly
to be able to say to someone calmly, “I guess I won’t walk on those anymore.” It just
floored me. So those stories, the trouble I was having with my commanders, the trouble
with my wife and not knowing what was going on there, the change in the strategy of the
war as I saw it, the drug use. It was just—it got to be too much for me I think, Laura. I
think it just got to be too much for me. Captain Tangey and myself, we were bunkmates
back in the rear area. He was now the battalion adjutant and I was the battalion 4.

LC: Now who was this? What was his—?
RK: This was Cpt. Jerry Tangey. This was the young man that earlier I had
replaced as Bravo Company commander.

LC: I remember now. He’s the adjutant.
RK: Yeah. He’s now the adjutant, but he’s getting short. He’s going home.

Jerry was a good guy. I quickly corrupted him. We went to Da Nang when we weren’t
supposed to be in Da Nang. We both had girlfriends in Da Nang. We visited the MACV
(Military Assistance Command, Vietnam) officer’s club when we weren’t supposed to
even when Da Nang was declared off limits from time to time. We would go down there.
I remember in a place called the China Night Club, becoming so drunk and running
around—well, I was acting like a dog, to be perfectly honest with whoever’s listening. I
mean, I was on my hands and knees running around trying to bite the prostitutes on the
ass with my teeth like a dog. It was just disgraceful behavior, but I was just out of
control. I really was out of control. I was in some kind of a state that I couldn’t control.
I didn’t know what to do. I finally got in touch with Barbara and I pleaded with her. I
felt like—I know we didn’t have a strong marriage and I know that we weren’t together
as husband and wife all those many months. Certainly if I had been more eloquent with
her at the time maybe things might’ve been different, but I needed her. I needed
something to anchor me back to reality.

LC: Did you speak to her on the phone, Bob?
RK: Yeah. I spoke to her on the telephone.
LC: Through the MARS (Military Affiliate Radio System) system or whatever?
RK: Yes. Yes.
LC: Which is already difficult.
RK: I just begged with her to— ‘cause I was due to have another R&R. I was
begging her to meet me in Hawaii, and she refused. She wasn’t gonna come to Hawaii.
She didn’t much care what I did. I suppose I can’t blame her, but I just think if I’d have
gotten maybe another chance, if I’d have gotten an opportunity to see the children at that
point, if I had got some moral direction from her about what I was doing and help maybe.
I don’t want to cast blame from myself by any means because I was terrible.
LC: No. That’s fair. Did you ask her for help?
RK: Oh, yeah. Well, I don’t know that I used those words specifically, but I
know that I said, “I need to see you. I want to see you. I want to come and visit with you
in Hawaii,” certainly those kinds of words.
LC: Sure. Did you talk to her about the kids at all?
RK: I don’t know the details.
LC: I know. These sorts of things are so intense. I just—
RK: Yeah. I don’t know that we spoke specifically about the children. To be
honest with you, I don’t know that she wasn’t already convinced then that the marriage
was over. Perhaps she had convinced herself by then that the marriage was over and that
there was no sense going to Hawaii to try to patch something up.
LC: But all she said was she wasn’t coming.
RK: All she said was that all men were bastards. She wasn’t gonna come to Hawaii. So I took a six-day in-country R&R.

LC: Where? In Da Nang?

RK: I went down to Saigon for six days and stayed drunk and stayed laid and spent a whole bunch of money and tried to drown my sorrows in all sorts of debauchery. Came back and just resumed my position as the battalion S-4 and just kind of waited my time out.

LC: Bob, can you talk a little bit about the feelings inside or maybe even the lack of feelings? It sounds—you’ve taken a lot of punishment, a lot of difficulty in-country. Of course, now you’ve got a problem back in the States which is what everyone really was waiting for was to get back to the States. Now that’s—what you thought you had there is probably not gonna be there. I mean, how does this impact you not only as a person, but as someone who has duties to discharge at the battalion level?

RK: That’s a good question, Laura. It’s certainly a—it’s devastating—a feeling inside of emptiness. You mentioned earlier the notion of did I hurt myself. No. I didn’t, but, yes. I abused alcohol. I took unnecessary risk. There were times when the guards—it was one time my own battalion guards nearly shot at me when I’m coming back into the compound late at night after being someplace where I’m not supposed to be and doing stupid things. Realizing, oh, shit, you’ve got to get back and go to work in the morning. So you better make your way back to the compound. The “Halt! Who goes there,” stuff. “Oh, this is Captain Kreger.” “What the fuck are you doing out here, sir?” Then you go on the carpet again in front of the old man. He chews your ass out. To me there was just a sense of emptiness, a sense that I didn’t have anything to live for at that point. At least I didn’t think so. I don’t recall that I ever had any conscious thoughts of suicide or anything. I just know that I was utterly depressed. I didn’t want to be in Vietnam any longer, but I didn’t know where I wanted to be, either.

LC: What about the Army itself?

RK: Well, see that’s—I still clung to the notion that the Army was my home and that if given the chance maybe I could turn things around and put this three or four months—it wasn’t—I’m making it out to sound like maybe it was a long period. It was only about two or three, four months that I went through this very tough emotional state.
in my life at the end of the second tour of duty. From, let’s see. September of ’71—let’s
going backward. It was June-July, July-August. Probably July-August-September of ’71
was this intense ninety-day or so period. I kept thinking, “Well, maybe if I get back to
America and if I get the right assignment maybe I can shake this period off.” I was still
so damn young. Hell, I was only twenty-three years old, twenty-four years old. I didn’t
have enough life experience to understand what was happening to me and certainly didn’t
understand how to solve my own problems and was much too proud to admit to anybody
that I even had problems.

LC: Was that a possibility? Let’s—
RK: Oh, gosh. If I’d have had somebody—maybe that’s what I was hoping
Barbara could have done for me. If I’d have had somebody to grab me by the nape of the
neck and say, “Look, young man, you need psychiatric help right now. You need a big
dose of it right now. We’re gonna put you in this place right now until you start to solve
some of the—” maybe that would’ve helped.

LC: Was that available to anyone?
RK: Oh, I don’t remember. I don’t remember how—
LC: Did you ever have to as a commander, or I mean an officer, did you ever
have to pull somebody out of a unit because they were not coping and just get them out of
there because they couldn’t handle it?
RK: No. Only one time as a rifle company commander there was a policy, of
course, with the heroin abuse and the drug abuse that was going on. The policy of
amnesty if a soldier came to you and requested a Medevac explaining that he was a
heroin addict we were expected to stop everything and put them on a Medevac helicopter
which pissed us off, but we did it. I did have one young man who came to me right after
a firefight. It wasn’t a serious firefight, but it had a couple guys wounded and needed to
come out. This young soldier was trying to get a Medevac out even before the wounded
because his excuse was he was strung out on heroin. Well, I promptly put him in his
place and he waited until everybody else was out. But, no. Other than the times when I
had to discipline soldiers for criminal acts—when I was back in Da Nang as a battalion S-
4, I had the Army’s version of internal affairs. I can’t remember what the hell they were
called, military intelligence or something—they came up to me. This is kind of a comical
story. A couple of Spec 4s dressed in civilian clothing, they come up. “We’re looking
for Cpt. Robert Kreger.” “Here I am.” “Yes, sir,” and they reach in their pockets like the
police detectives do on TV. They flashed their little badges at me. “We’re from such
and such and we suspect one of your men of drug abuse. We’d like your permission to
follow them around.” I said, “Hey, be my guest.” They caught the kid with more than a
hundred vials of heroin. They confronted him and he started running from them. He was
throwing them out of his pockets on the sides of the streets as they chased him down
through the battalion area.

LC: Where did this happen? At Da Nang?

RK: This happened in Da Nang. So there was another incident that I dealt with
that I just didn’t know how to do. I wasn’t trained to deal in those kinds of things and I
certainly wasn’t mature enough to understand what was happening to me psychologically
with all of the things that were going on. I don’t want to dwell too much more because
there’s just not much more to say.

LC: I understand. I understand. Let me ask you this. Between your first tour as
a Special Forces advisor to the Montagnards, 1968, ’69, and your second tour with the
Americal Division as a company commander ’70 to ’71, would you say, Bob, that these
were different wars or was there a different man there?

RK: Well, I think it is a combination of the two. It’s within Special Forces
operations as an A team commander or an A team XO. As a member of the Special
Forces A team, or for that matter a member of any Special Forces operation, the conduct
of the war is very much different. The people that you interact with daily are, dare I say,
more professional. There’s far less discipline problems, far less drug problems. Now
that’s not to say the Green Berets didn’t do bad things—not bad things, but didn’t do
stupid things. Working with the Montagnards, of course, the type of operations that you
engaged in, were different. Then came the second tour. Yes, Bob Kreger was a different
man the second time around. I was more confident in myself. I was more full of myself,
but I was also much weaker, too. When push came to shove and my world began to
crumble around me I didn’t have the skills to stay strong, to stay above it. I allowed
myself to wallow in my own self pity and to abuse alcohol and abuse women. Christ,
Laura, I set fire to a house. I’ve never told anybody that once. Only a very few people
know that. I don’t know what happened to the occupants of the house, but I don’t know
whether I should tell that story publicly or not.

LC: What was—was this while you were drunk at some point?
RK: Huh? I’m sorry.
LC: While you were drunk at some point or high?
RK: Oh, yeah. I was—well, I wasn’t high. I never abused drugs. I mean, I did
smoke the marijuana two times.

LC: Two whole times?
RK: Two times, but that was it. Never anything else. Just alcohol.
LC: Just the bottle was the thing.
RK: Just the bottle. Yeah, I was in a situation with a prostitute where I was
drunk. She rolled me. Took all my money, took all my clothes. I was off base. I was in
a position of great vulnerability. I was unarmed. I could have easily been killed. I woke
up to find myself in a strange little house. I found my clothes. I put some clothes on. I
got dressed as much as I could find. I don’t know what the hell ever happened to the rest
of them. I asked a few of the people in the back alley what had happened to my friend.
They said that she’d gone back some place and that the White Mice had picked her up.
The “White Mice” was the expression for the Vietnamese police—that they had picked
her up and taken her away. I knew that was a lie. I found my wallet and realized I didn’t
have any more money left. So I was very, very angry. I spotted her little Honda. I put
the Honda on top of the bed, stacked up all the furniture on top of the Honda and emptied
up the gas tank of the Honda and set the whole place on fire. Made my way out and back
to the camp. I don’t know whatever happened. I didn’t look back. So I mean, those
were the types of things that a rational person just doesn’t do. Yet there I was doing
them. Just out of control. I don’t know. I don’t know much more to say.

LC: Go ahead, Bob.
RK: Well, after that particular incident, life was as normal as abnormal could be,
I guess, around Da Nang for me. I longed to come home. I wanted to be rid of these
experiences. I certainly felt that coming home might give me second chances. I wasn’t
sure second chances at what at the time. I guess I’m ready in the interview process to
bring that to a close and talk about a little bit about the things that have happened after
that, how I came to be doing some of the things I’m doing now. Yeah.

LC: Did you continue to sort of act out on sort of the lines that you’ve described
for the entire rest of your time in Vietnam?

RK: No. No. No. I didn’t.

LC: What happened, if anything, to kind of change that dynamic a little?

RK: I guess I just came to realize that my career as an Army captain was
certainly not progressing as I had thought that it was going to. As an S-4 battalion
logistics officer I suppose I was doing an adequate job and damn sure wasn’t doing a very
good job. I was so preoccupied with all the other stuff going on. You talked about
earlier what it kind of made you—it made me feel like I didn’t want to get up in the
morning. It’s not that I didn’t have anything to live for, but I just didn’t want to get out
of bed—a constant state, perhaps, of depression. I just didn’t care to do anything, just
leave me alone and let me stay in this state of stupor until something jars me out of it.

Major Holland, the battalion XO, was partially responsible for jarring me out of it. He
and I actually had a fist-fight. I mean, I’m a captain. He’s a major. I actually was stupid
enough to have a fist-fight and this guy kicked my ass.

LC: What was it over?

RK: Just booze—booze and me being stupid.

LC: You’re from the Gabriel Demonstration team.

RK: Well, yeah, but that didn’t matter. He was 5’10” about 240 pounds of solid
rock.

LC: Wow, 240?

RK: Yeah, he just cleaned my clock. He put me down a couple three times and I
didn’t want to get up. It came to pass I think, Laura, that I just realized that I’ve got to
stop this kind of behavior and try to do the best I can. Just let time pass and I’ll be home.

So that’s kind of how the second tour of duty ended. It was just a very painful period, but
a period that I wanted to see certainly come to an end. I retreated a little bit. I stopped
being so in-the-face with everybody all the time. Much more low key in my approach to
my interaction with people.
LC: Did there come some kind of point when you realized, “I can’t drink this away?”

RK: Yeah, I suppose to some degree, yes. I do remember I was able to calm that down. I mean, not completely stop it, of course, but to kind of calm it down somewhat. It didn’t ever stop, of course.

LC: Right. Did it give you a little—you took back a little corner of control?

RK: Yes. Yeah. I was able to. That’s a good way to describe it. I was able to take back a little corner of control as the time approached for me to go back home. Of course, once I got home then things got worse.

LC: Now when did you actually leave Vietnam?

RK: Oh, boy. I actually left—it would’ve been September of ’71.

LC: Did everybody say “Good riddance” or—?

RK: Oh, yeah. I think I left so quietly with my legs, I mean my tail, excuse me, my tail tucked so tightly between my legs I don’t remember saying goodbye to people. I don’t remember people saying goodbye to me. I just got the hell out. When my time came I just got on a plane and got down to the airports, out-processed, kept my mouth shut, just got out of there.

LC: Do you remember the flight back toward the States, anything about that?

RK: Not a great deal. I do remember again that the stewardesses kept getting prettier and prettier as you got closer and closer to America. I remember feeling alone. I remember feeling—travelling alone. Keep in mind, I had not—I didn’t know if my wife would even be at the airport. She knew that I was coming home. She knew the day that I would arrive in North Carolina.

LC: So that had been arranged and communicated to her?

RK: Yes. Yes. There had been some communication between the two of us. It was pretty icy, pretty cold.

LC: Was she there?

RK: Yes. She was there. She did meet me at the airport. We didn’t even—we exchanged hugs. We exchanged kisses, but there certainly wasn’t much after that. It was very shortly after that—by then we had purchased a home on the outskirts of Ft. Bragg. It was a very nice little ranch-style house on Kaywood Avenue. I wasn’t even allowed to
sleep with her. By the time I returned and we said our hellos at the airport within a
matter of a few minutes she informed me that she had already been to see an attorney and
that divorce papers were pending and that I would be expected to sign them. She had
been advised not to allow me to sleep with her. I could stay in the house if I promised to
sleep on the couch. That was how I came home.

LC: What about the kids?
RK: I did have contact with them, but certainly—

LC: Did you see them right when you got home?
RK: Yes. Yeah. Of course, they were both young.

LC: You’d been away.
RK: I’d been away. To them I was a stranger still.

LC: Which is also kind of—?
RK: Yeah.

LC: Just more and more—
RK: I couldn’t get started rebuilding at that time. That’s not the right way to say
it but, gosh, by the first week of October I had signed divorce papers and moved on.

That’s another time in your life that you look back on and you say, “Jesus, if I’d only
been smarter. If I’d have gotten some good advice, maybe, or if I had been just a little bit
mature about these things.” Barbara had arranged the divorce papers such that there was
very small alimony. I mean, there was no alimony at all, I should say. Twenty-five
dollars per month per child for child support and that I would only be allowed visitation if
the child support payments were current. I don’t know to what degree she and her
attorney had concocted this. I don’t want to speak bad of her. She was only doing what
she thought was best for herself.

LC: Probably for the kids.
RK: And for the children.

LC: Yes.
RK: As she looked at her life with me and what it had been and what it looked
like it was going to be, I’d have done the same thing if I’d have been her no doubt. So
there is no blame there at all. My only regret is that she just didn’t give me a second
chance. I just begged her and begged her and begged her to allow me time to prove to
her that I could change. She wouldn’t hear of that. I can’t guarantee that I would’ve changed, but I just wanted that chance. So I left. I left North Carolina. The first week of October I signed the divorce papers. I got a car, one of the cars that we had in the family, and off I went to my next duty station which was in St. Louis, Missouri. Like I said a moment ago, if I had known then that I had parental rights. If I had known then that I could have fought, perhaps, legally for some type of custody, if I’d have just known what the whole process of this thing called divorce, the whole process of this thing called losing a relationship, if I’d have just done it, but I was so blinded in my loyalty to the Army. I thought, “Well, hell I’m still active duty in the Army. I don’t have a choice. I have to go to my next duty station. I don’t have the opportunity to stay here in Fayetteville and argue about this divorce stuff. I’ve got to do what I’m told to do thus I’m told to go to Ft. Bragg or to St. Louis.” So off I went. I said goodbye to the children and said goodbye to Barbara and got in the car and drove away and never looked back. That was a very stupid thing, but it was at that time in my growth it was the only thing that I knew to do thinking that’s what I was supposed to do, if that makes any sense at all.

LC: Bob, you were twenty-four?

RK: Twenty-four.

LC: Did you get a lawyer?

RK: No. No. I never had any representation at all.

LC: Okay. Wow. Let me just ask this and I know this is personal, and if it’s too much that’s fine. You said that you did try to talk to her and ask her for another chance to try to be together as a family. As you thought about it later think to yourself, “Well, I said everything I knew to say. I tried everything I knew to try and I did the best I could.” Or did you think later, “I should’ve said this? I should’ve said that. I was too proud or were you kind of at peace with what”—I mean you had tried the best you could with—

RK: I didn’t give it a full try. I would have to say—well, in my own defense I would say that I did all that I knew how to do.

LC: At that time.

RK: At that time. As I said a moment earlier, at that time I didn’t know that I could get a lawyer. At that time I didn’t know that maybe I could just go to Ft. Bragg and say to someone, “I need legal help. My wife is divorcing me.”
LC: Right. Did you—
RK: I never even did that.
LC: Right. You didn’t tell anybody in the military.
RK: I didn’t tell anybody. No.
LC: Of course, they might have said to you, “Well, go down to legal aid or whatever.”
RK: Yeah. I never even—all I thought was, “God I’ve got to go to St. Louis, Missouri. That’s the next thing I’m supposed to do in my life. Here’s a set of orders directing me to do that.”
LC: I have to be there by this date.
RK: I’ve got to be there by that date.
LC: She’s not coming.
RK: She’s not coming. So, on the one hand with hindsight if I had gotten legal help and insisted on some things. I don’t know that it would’ve saved our marriage, probably not in the long run. That’s not the best thing to say. I don’t think that much would have been different. Perhaps I would’ve come away with a feeling that I did do everything I could do.
LC: Here’s a question. On the other side of things—did she tell you why?
RK: No. No. No.
LC: Okay.
RK: She did say that she had been seeing other men, which hurt me deeply. She didn’t say that she was involved with another man at that time at all. Again, I don’t blame her. If I had been her and been hurt by her the way I had hurt her—I mean, here was a young woman with two small children. She was just doing the best she could do.
I’m sure that she was changing and growing while I was not, maybe.
LC: Or just differently.
RK: Or just differently. I don’t think that she wanted out of our marriage just because she might have found someone new, but my track record was cause enough.
LC: When you say that, do you mean some of the sort of things you had said that were kind of insensitive or was it the fact that you had already been deployed overseas twice for—?
RK: Well, I had been deployed overseas twice. When I was with her in between trips to Vietnam I was not a good husband, not a good family man although I had two children at the time.

LC: The traveling—

RK: The traveling, the macho attitude of the Green Beret travelling team. All of that stuff was certainly—

LC: How much did she know about what you guys had gotten up to?

RK: Quite a bit. Quite a bit.

LC: Because you told her.

RK: Yeah.

LC: I mean, essentially you were honest with her?

RK: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, it wasn’t hard for her to figure out, either, what her husband was up to. She was a very smart woman and still is a very smart woman.

LC: Right. Okay. Well, let me ask you about St. Louis.

RK: Okay.

LC: What was your—?

RK: You wanted to ask me another question, though.

LC: Well, I wanted to ask you about the division, about Americal and whether there was at the time you were there and in the situation that surrounded you in your command. Was there a culture that seemed to let the discipline slide a little?

RK: Based on my experience I would have to say, no, that I didn’t observe a general unit-wide lack of discipline and/or corruption of the system. I interacted with Colonel Saint, Colonel Roberts, Major Holland. We had another major. Oh, God, what was—Hawkins I think was his name—a scrappy little guy with a patch over his right eye in the 196th Brigade. It was a rough-and-ready group of men. There is no doubt.

LC: Was some of what was going on being shaped by what was happening in the States and the young men who were coming over? We’ve talked a little bit—well, actually quite a bit about some of the race dynamics that had gotten so sharpened by this time, 1970, ’71. Was the system where guys came over especially draftees and they were serving for one year and that was it? They’re coming from Philadelphia or they’re coming from Detroit or they’re coming from New Jersey and they’re bringing with them
a changed and changing view of race relations and view of drugs and antiwar sentiment
and all of that. Was that playing into the mix, too?

RK: Oh, yes. Yes. It was definitely. As we spoke earlier, to me there was a very
palpable divide between the senior officers, senior NCOs, who were field-grade officers
or E-8 and E-9 NCOs who’d been around for twenty years plus. Younger company grade
officers such as myself, captains and first lieutenant, and second lieutenants who’d only
been in for two years or three and who were still under the age of twenty-five or thirty—
there was a real gap there. There was also a gap in the way that we perceived our role, a
gap in the way that we enforced discipline. Yes there was a very clear difference, but in
the conduct of the soldiers as it got closer and closer to ’72.

LC: How about how you all saw each other?

RK: Oh, boy. Sometimes as enemies as much as friends. The race relations were
strained. There was always a difficult time. Having said that, I mean, there were others
that just—there were people who were able to rise above that pettiness and be good
soldiers and good friends to one another, dependable and loyal friends to one another
whose friendship could’ve withstood any sort of tragedy. But in the main, there was a
constant tension not knowing what blacks might do to whites or white officers might to
do to black soldiers or Hispanic people might to do to the whites or to the blacks or what
the whites or the blacks might to do the Hispanics. There was a constant sense of unease
about—

LC: What about—?

RK: I don’t know whether it was just specific to the Americal or not.

LC: I think probably not. What about the changing political situation? This is
now two years—this is almost the end of Nixon’s first term. His policy is to get
Americans out and to replace them with fully-trained and well-advised South Vietnamese
military officers and military men to fight the mission, the whole Vietnamization
program. How much did that play a role, too, the sense that we’re not here to finish this
war?

RK: Yeah. I think to those soldiers who had the time and the skill to think of
these things and who actually took the effort to try to become aware of the conscious—I
mean, yeah, you couldn’t help but think of the futility of the situation. You couldn’t help
but to think of the fact that it’s never gonna end and that we’re not going to accomplish a
mission here militarily.

LC: This isn’t gonna be the occupation of Berlin and everyone’s going to—yeah.
RK: Yeah. Yeah.

LC: There will be a big party.

RK: I think to some degree that sense of unfulfilled obligation—it’s kin to the
situation in Iraq now when the soldiers, a combat soldier has a mission to do, but that
combat soldier’s mission is being impeded by the politics that get in the way. That was
happening in Vietnam and it made it very frustrating.

LC: You mentioned the change of policy around when you could fire. Were
there other changes like—that’s a pretty solid piece of evidence, but were there other
things that you—

RK: That’s the one, Laura, that most clearly sticks out in my memory.

LC: Well, as a company commander I can believe it.

RK: Yeah. I could not really believe that we had received orders that sort of
changed the rules of engagement to that degree.

LC: Did you blame—if you were mad enough to try to place blame around that, did you think of Nixon and Kissinger—?

RK: Oh, yes.

LC: Or did you think of Abrams?

RK: Most of all, I think most people would’ve thought of Richard Nixon as the
one to blame. Yes.

LC: Really?

RK: Yes. Yeah. Whether that’s true or not, as commander-in-chief—a military
person looks to the commander-in-chief as the one who should set the tone for the war. If
the commander-in-chief says, “Don’t do this,” or, “Do do that,” then that’s who you can
blame for the success or failure of that particular decision.

LC: Yeah. Well, you were there at a very complicated time. There’s no question
about that. Certainly, Nixon later did try, to my mind, to send the North Vietnamese a
very clear message that we weren’t going to just fiddle while Rome burned and ordered
the bombings up north. That was after yet a whole ‘nother eight or nine months after you
left of negotiations in Paris that weren’t particularly productive.

RK: As I often tell my students, I’m just flabbergasted at the level of—it took
them how long to decide the shape of the table that they would even sit at, at the Paris
Peace talks? For crying out loud, men, just sit down and start talking.

LC: Right. It is mind boggling, but it also tells you that wasn’t—getting to the
bottom of it and getting a deal done was not what was primary at that time, obviously.

RK: Yeah.

LC: Well, let’s take a break there.
Interview with Robert Kreger
Date: March 28, 2006

Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. I am happily continuing the interview that I’ve been conducting with Dr. Robert Kreger. Today is the twenty-eighth of March 2006. I am in Lubbock and Bob is at Cerritos College in California. Hi, Bob.

Robert Kreger: Good morning, Laura.

LC: Thank you again for your time, Bob. Of course, you know that this is important to us and to the future that we get a good and as full as possible interview. Bob, last time we talked you were being moved by the Army to your next duty station which was in St. Louis, Missouri, I believe.

RK: Yes.

LC: What post was it and what posting did you have?

RK: Okay. Well, we did leave off with the separation between Barbara and myself and my two children, Greg and Kirsten, and me moving on to what I thought was the next phase in my life, I suppose, or the next duty station. I was assigned to a group of United States Army Reserve advisors. I was part of the structure of the Reserve, active Army people who acted as advisors to Army Reserve units. I was based out of the Mart Building, M-A-R-T, the Mart Building in St. Louis. I think even our offices were on the ninth floor. It was completely unlike anything I had ever been assigned to. I didn’t know what to think of it. I didn’t know whether it was an important position or an unimportant position. I know that I had done things in the final days of my Vietnam tour, the second tour, that were certainly despicable. I didn’t know whether that was catching up to me, whether I had gotten this type of an assignment as a result of something I had done or perhaps not done.

LC: Had you seen your fitness reports?

RK: No I had not. No I had not. I knew that I had received that Article 15. I knew that that was in my records.

LC: Yeah, that wouldn’t be helpful really.
RK: No. So I was concerned and what I did before, actually even before leaving to go from North Carolina to St. Louis, I drove to the Pentagon from North Carolina. I made an appointment, drove up to the Pentagon, and spoke to a major who was my advisor or the officer who had my records and who was supposedly managing or helping to manage my particular career or something like that. I sat at his desk and I remember that he was pretty matter-of-fact about it. He had my files there or something. I don’t know if he had the complete 201 file or not, but he had some papers in front of him and he was looking over the papers. My question to him was “Look, I’m Airborne qualified. I’m a combat veteran. I’m Special Forces qualified. Why are you giving me this leg assignment?”—in a sort of derogatory term this leg assignment. “Why are you giving me what I perceive of as a very unimportant assignment?” His response was that it was a good assignment. “We want to send you to St. Louis here. We’re going to give you an OER (operating experience report) after about ninety days or so, a hundred and twenty days. If your MOP”—which is short for manner of performance—“if your MOP in St. Louis is satisfactory we plan to send you to the career school and then off to Europe.” I thought to myself, “Well, hell that ain’t so bad. Now I understand a little bit more about why I’m being assigned to St. Louis. Okay. I can handle this. Career school, Europe—hell, by then perhaps I’ll be a senior captain maybe even be in line for major. I could handle Europe as a major.” So I was satisfied with the results of my interview there at the Pentagon. I drove back to North Carolina and said my goodbyes, such as they were, and headed off to St. Louis. The job in St. Louis was actually quite enjoyable. I worked in an office with a civilian secretary. She was probably a GS-7 or -9—very, very competent woman—a full colonel who was the commander of our unit. Then there was a lieutenant colonel. I think I was the third officer. I don’t think there was anybody between the lieutenant colonel and myself. We had an E-8 or E-9, an enlisted man, and a couple E-6s in the office. We were essentially advisors to the Army Reserve units and we were responsible for logistics training, administration for two-and-a-half states. Let’s see, we were in St. Louis. I think we had all of Missouri and Illinois and I think half of Iowa or some combination of that. So what we did was to travel around and visit the Army Reserve units. My specific job was operations and training. So when it came to matters of how a Reserve unit, an infantry Reserve unit, should operate and train, the
commander would seek my advice and we helped them get ready for inspections and help
them write training plans and things like that. As I said, it was pretty enjoyable. I was a
middle captain at the time. I was making a considerable amount of money. This was
1971, ’72, early—well, late ’71 and early ’72. I was living the life of a bachelor in St.
Louis. Not too shabby. Sadly, and this of course we talk about life’s regrets and things,
sadly I didn’t look backwards and I didn’t maintain contact with my children. I didn’t
maintain contact with my former wife and—

LC: Now had you two discussed that?

RK: Well, the discussion was that I would be allowed—my ex-wife knew that I
would still be in the Army, I’m sure. I don’t know. I would stop short at saying cold and
calculating, but she was protective. She was protective of herself and the two children
and she had to be. I hadn’t given her much reason not to be, to think otherwise. The
stipulation was that I would only be allowed visitation if the child support payments were
current and coupled with the fact that I was going to be a thousand miles or eight hundred
miles away and still in the Army. It made it pretty difficult logistically for me to think
that I would be able to have frequent visits. Thus, it made it easier psychologically for me
to fall behind quickly with the child support payments.

LC: Now the Army wasn’t involved in it?

RK: No, not at all. Not to my knowledge. I mean, Barbara may have been
receiving some help or something from her end in North Carolina, but I sure didn’t.

LC: The Army wasn’t taking it out of—they hadn’t been ordered by a court to
take it out of your—?

RK: No. No, no, no. That was up to me. Yes. Gosh, if it had been the other
way around things might have been a lot different.

LC: Yeah. I don’t know how they do it now. My guess is that the court order
affects, especially a federal employee of any stripe, but I really don’t know. I don’t
know.

RK: So consequently I began to lead another life, I suppose you would say,
another phase in my life. I was twenty-four years old, twenty-four-and-a-half years old
perhaps, about that age, and enjoying that type of life. Well, all of a sudden here comes
the spring of 1972 and the Vietnam War, the Paris Peace Accords are being negotiated.
The war is scaling down. American troops are withdrawing. Congress and the Army or
Congress and the military enact a RIF, a reduction in force. Suddenly I got a pink slip. I
never even had the opportunity—and this is one thing that does anger me quite a bit
sometimes when I think it about like this morning. I never had a chance to show the
Army that I could change. I never had a chance to show the Army in St. Louis that I
could once again be relied upon to be a professional soldier as I had earlier in my
military. There’s no doubt that I faltered and I stumbled. There’s no doubt about that at
all. I’m greatly, greatly sorry for that, but I never even got a damn OER or fitness report
written at St. Louis. I hadn’t even been in St. Louis ninety days and I got RIF’ed out.
Now, from what I understand when I got my letter saying “goodbye,” I didn’t have—and
this happened to many, many officers as I understand it. I tried to do as much research
about this period as I could. I didn’t have the opportunity to reenlist as an NCO. I didn’t
have the opportunity to switch to another branch of the military. I was simply gone and
apparently it happened in three phases, at least three phases that I’m aware of. The first
cut of the RIF were officers who had bad OERs in their records. I did not get affected by
that. So I said to myself, “Well, God. Maybe I survived this thing.” The second RIF
were all those—now these were Reserve officers. So, you see, I still had a Reserve
commission at this time. All those officers, first of all, who had bad OERs, they got
eliminated. Secondly all officers who had less than five years of continuous active
federal service, because if you had less than five years of continuous active federal
service the Army didn’t have to pay you any readjustment money.

LC: You weren’t vested, as it were.

RK: Yeah. You weren’t vested and here they got me. This really saddens me.

Here they got rid of majors and other officers who had been sixteen and seventeen years
of service at two or three years of active duty at a time and then returning to their civilian
lives as managers or attorneys or doctors or whatever for a few years and then coming
back on active duty. These men were just axed. They just got nothing. Maybe a
handshake or a kick in the ass, but they got out. Then third RIF apparently was where
they caught me and that was officers who had just above five years of continuous active
service. I had had six years, one month, and eighteen days— but hell who’s counting—
of active continuous federal service. So in gratitude the Army gave me $10,240 some
dollars or something like that at Ft. Leonard Wood, Missouri.

LC: They gave you a ten-thousand-dollar handshake and that was it?

RK: Yeah. That was it. Adios motherfucker. Pardon my language. Adios baby,
you’re done. I went from having a career and hope for the future and a reasonably nice
job in St. Louis to the unemployment line in ninety days, Laura. In less than ninety days
my life, again, just crumbled. I remember that first unemployment paycheck. Eighty-
seven dollars a week. No. Yeah. Eighty-seven bucks a week is what I got
unemployment. I was—Jesus, God, was I mad! Eighty-seven dollars. Now I’m out of
the Army and now what the hell am I going to do? I don’t have a college education. I
don’t have any real training to speak of. I don’t have a marriage. Now, I was involved
already with another woman who ultimately became Mrs. Kreger number two, but that
wasn’t all that satisfying. It damn sure didn’t last very long, but I was lost. I was lost
again. I went through a pretty damn tough period of time. If I may here this morning, I
just want to recount a little bit of that.

LC: I think if you’d like to, that would be very helpful.

RK: To try to put things in perspective because I was, I was very angry at the
Army. My father was extremely mad at the Army. Oh, he was just bitter as hell that his
son had dedicated all that time and the Vietnam trips and the Army just summarily axed
him.

LC: Yeah. Two tours. I mean, that’s really something.

RK: Yeah. I was upset, too. I mean, I was very angry. What kind of gratitude is
this? Doggone you guys! I never got any answers.

LC: Were you mad at the Army? Were you mad at Congress? Could you make
that distinction?

RK: Oh, I was more mad at the Army than I was at the American public. As I
grew away from that over the last thirty-some years I’ve come to understand how the
American public must have felt at that time in 1972. I don’t begrudge them the fact that
they were anti-war and anti-Richard Nixon, perhaps, and that they wanted their young
men to come home from Vietnam. Just the same as we want now, for goodness gracious
sakes. So, no. I was more angry at the Army. I was more angry at the system. I was
angry because I couldn’t get any information about what had happened to me other than: 
“You’re out of the Army.” So that happened to me in the spring of 1972. In April of ’72 
was when I was RIF’ed out. So essentially from ’72 to 1979, I wandered aimlessly 
through the Midwest making stupid decisions, sometimes reasonable decisions, but for 
the most part not very wise decisions. These were moments in a person’s life when a 
decision that they make could have such far-reaching implications. If I had chosen then 
to return to California, how different my life would be today. If I had chosen then not to 
marry a second time so quickly, how different things would be, but I didn’t choose those 
things. I clung to the only piece of reality that I knew of and that was the lady who 
would become my second wife.

LC: How long were you married to her?
RK: Ten months.
LC: In what year or years?
RK: Ay, ay, ay. We married in—we ll, she quickly went through my ten 
thousand bucks, I’ll tell you that. That didn’t take long. Of course, I didn’t let that ten 
thousand dollars—hell, I didn’t give a shit. We married in ’73, I think, to ’74.

LC: Wow. So you’re right—
RK: Oh, I was out of the fire right back into the frying pan.

LC: Yeah. That’s what it sounds like.
RK: Yeah. I sold furniture to poor people in East St. Louis. I worked as a 
manager in a Jack-in-the-Box restaurant. I did come back to California and tried to work 
in the construction industry, but I was here in the Los Angeles area, actually in Fontana. 
My parents were in San Diego. We barely even spoke. After a couple of weeks here of 
no work at all I returned to Illinois—another very vital turning point in my life. I mean, 
hell, all I had to do was point the car south and I could have been in San Diego again and 
maybe got some nurturing from my sister and my mother and my dad. Maybe they 
would have caused me to go in different directions, but I don’t know. Maybe I was 
proud. Maybe I was being very stubborn. I just went right back to Illinois and started 
working at Granite City Army Depot—I’m sorry, at Granite City Steel. I worked in the 
steel mill. God it was dreadful and there is—

LC: Bob—
RK: There is—

LC: Go ahead Bob.

RK: Go ahead.

LC: I was just going to ask, is this all, essentially I mean once you’ve been divorced from this other woman this is just hand-to-mouth? I mean, did you have a plan?

RK: No. You’re right. I really didn’t have a plan. It was hand-to-mouth. It was trying to find a job that suited me. My father did get in touch with me telling me that some mercenary outfits had been sending me letters to my address in Lemon Grove inviting me to join mercenary outfits and possibly go to Angola, Africa. He told me that he had been tearing those up because he didn’t want any part of that for his son. In a way I’m glad. I don’t think I would have wanted to be tempted by the opportunity to go to Angola.

LC: Well, it would have spiced up the resume. Would have been a little different from Jack-in-the-Box, maybe, I don’t know, but frightening.

RK: Yeah. I mean Jack-in-the-Box situation was dreadful as well. I don’t want to take precious interview time and go through all those things but—

LC: Well, but this is a very difficult period.

RK: Yeah. The notion is that from 1972 to 1979 were very difficult for me.

LC: Was it made any more difficult, Bob, by the fact that this is exactly the time period when the United States in effect came to a negotiated agreement with North Vietnam and pulled out of South Vietnam and left and then stood by essentially while the North overtook the South? Were you paying attention to any of that?

RK: Laura, to be perfectly honest, I wasn’t paying a heck of a lot of attention to it. No.

LC: So Vietnam was—?

RK: Vietnam was behind me. I was involved in many new things, some good, most of them not so good, struggling to find a new career for myself and to some extent ashamed of the fact that I was no longer in the Army. Maybe ashamed is not the best word, but very disappointed. Very disappointed in myself and searching for—

LC: Was there any point in here during the 1970s, the late 1970s particularly, when you might have been able to get back in? Did you investigate that or not?
RK: I did not investigate going back in on active duty, but what I did was to go back in the Reserve forces.

LC: Okay. When did that happen?

RK: That provided me with some salvation.

LC: Absolutely. When did that happen, Bob?

RK: Well, what happened there was from 1973 to ’74 was the time period where I was managing the Jack-in-the-Box restaurant. My wife at the time was also very involved in foster care. We operated, or she operated for the most part, a house that was authorized for children zero to eighteen years of age on emergency basis. We had converted the basement of the house into bunk beds and living areas. It was not uncommon at all for me to work twelve-, sixteen-hour shift at the Jack-in-the-Box and come home and find six or eight new children in the house that I’d never even seen before. So my life was pretty chaotic and all I wanted to do was to end that chaos. So I applied—and I really don’t even know how I found out about this—but I applied for a federal civil service position as an Army Reserve technician in Ames, Iowa. I didn’t know anything at all about Ames, Iowa, at the time but I did know that I didn’t like Jack-in-the-Box. I did know that I didn’t like having six, eight, ten—at one time we had thirteen children in the house.

LC: That really does take a special—

RK: Oh, boy! I was still full of rage from Vietnam.

LC: You were?

RK: Oh, yeah. Still a lot of alcohol in my life at the time. I mean, one funny story, somewhat funny—one of my second wife’s girlfriends had a boyfriend who was a Korean War veteran who had been hit with shrapnel in Korea. As a result of this he had a glass eye. His right eye was glass. He and I would sit and drink and just get snockered. Then at three-thirty, four, five o’clock in the morning we decide to go to the local IHOP restaurant. We’d stumble into this IHOP restaurant at, you know, a regular basis on Sunday mornings or Friday mornings whenever in the wee hours. The waitresses would just turn their backs because they knew what hell was going to happen. We’d sit down and we’d order huge amounts of food and coffee and sit there. This guy—I can’t remember his name but, God, he was funny as hell. He’d take his eye out and he’d put it
in the coffee. He’d say, “Waitress! God damn it waitress! There’s an eye in my coffee!”

If he had done it once, Laura, he’d done it a hundred times. The waitresses knew what
the hell—but it took a certain amount of booze and a certain amount of time there at the
IHOP. He’d, you know, he’d look across at me. I’d see him, he take his right hand and
he’d put his right hand over his right eye and he’d move those fingers around so he could
pop that glass eye out and he’d drop it into the coffee. Oh, Christ. I’d be laughing my
ass off across the table from him. “Waitress! There’s an eye in my coffee!” God.

(Laughs)

LC: I had to cut my microphone because I was laughing so hard.
RK: This guy was a riot! That’s what we did. Anyway, we—
LC: Yummy! That’s classic.
RK: Yeah. I got a telephone call from Sparta, Wisconsin, asking me if I would
be interested in applying for a position in Ames, Iowa. I said “Yes.” Would I consent to
a telephonic interview? I said, “Yes.” So a couple days later in the very early morning
hours I got a telephone call from Ames, Iowa, from the man who would become my
supervisor there. He interviewed me briefly over the telephone. He offered me the
position as the Army Reserve technician at a position of GS-6, step one at that time,
which wasn’t a hell of a lot of money per year but, boy, it sure sounded a heck of a lot
better than what I was doing in St. Louis.

LC: Well, there’s some stability there, as well.
RK: Yes. There was some stability.
LC: Had you been to Ames, Iowa?
RK: No. I’d never been there in my life. Didn’t even know where the hell it
was. Didn’t even know where it was and didn’t care. I was going. I rolled over. I said
We’re moving.” She said, “I’m not moving. I’m not leaving my mother.” That was that.
So within a matter of days I packed up my stuff and I moved to Iowa. The plan was that I
would move to Iowa and get settled and establish myself. Then she would join me a few
days later or thirty days later. Well, about sixteen or seventeen days after I arrived in
Iowa I got divorce papers through the mail. That was kind of nice. The county sheriff
walks in the Army Reserve Center and asks if there’s a Robert Kreger anywhere around.
My boss says, “Oh, yeah. He’s over there.” Gives me divorce papers. So that was the end of marriage number two.

LC: She had—you did not really get a chance to discuss this with her?
RK: Oh, no, not at all.
LC: What about a telephone—I mean, did you call her?
RK: Just gone. Just gone. All I got out of that marriage was a 1972 Dodge Coronet and a St. Bernard dog. That’s it.
LC: Well, the dog sounds good.
RK: The dog was good.
LC: The car would be worth something now.
RK: You know, I just had to reconstruct my life, Laura. So I poured my energies into the Army Reserve. That seemed to satisfy me for a time. I don’t want to dwell too much on that. I did fairly well as an Army Reserve advisor. I was an advisor to an ordnance company there in Ames, Iowa. I went through correspondence school. I finished the ordnance officer career course in correspondence. I actually had a branch transfer from infantry to ordnance. I was kind of rebuilding things. I’d been promoted to major.
LC: Really?
RK: Yeah. I got promoted to major as in the Army Reserves. Things seemed to be getting back into place.
LC: Sounds like it.
RK: I started that job in 1974. By 1977 things had started to come back together.
I had met another woman who would eventually become Mrs. Kreger number three. She was very loving and kind. We were about the same age, had essentially the same interests. We began to date and that seemed to be working out. We married in 1977. I invited my mother and father to come back for the marriage because this girl was, Mrs. Kreger number three was from a very religious family and very traditional mid-western Iowa family, the antithesis of Mrs. Kreger number two, who was a platinum blonde in go-go boots. Boy, she was hotter than a pistola, but anyway—
LC: Wow.
RK: Yeah. Oh, yeah. I’ve had my fill of that. Anyway, when I remembered
inviting my mom, my dad said to me, “Well, this one must mean something. This is the
first time we’ve been invited.”
LC: That’s nice, Dad.
RK: Yeah. Thanks, Dad. You know? But he had to remind me that I’d been
married twice and never even invited him.
LC: That’s also how they felt, I’m sure.
RK: Yeah. Yeah. Then shortly after—we married in’77. Disaster struck once
again. We were at the annual training, the two-week annual training, for the Army
Reserve units. I got to drinking and got to drinking too much and did some things that
were not very appropriate. Members of the units that we were at camp with at Sparta
complained. I was gone.
LC: Now when you say you were gone, how did that happen if you can say?
RK: Well, I was—I did some things which weren’t appropriate for an officer to
do. I’d like to leave it at that.
LC: That’s fine. That’s fine. Did you get a piece of paper which said—?
RK: Oh, no. I was given a choice. I could resign my position as the—let’s see,
how was it? I could resign my position as the Army Reserve technician and get out of the
Army, asked to be transferred out of the Reserves, or I would be brought up on charges. I
said, “Well, geez, I guess that’s not a whole hell of a lot of choices here.” So I resigned
my position as the Army Reserve technician and transferred myself into the inactive
Reserves and again in 1977 found myself adrift. Again, Laura, nobody’s fault but my
own. I mean, if I hadn’t been so stupid, if I hadn’t let the—I was reliving the Vietnam. I
was here in America in an Army Reserve unit with men and women. I was doing things
reminiscent of the heyday of the stupidity of Vietnam, which were just completely out of
place. By then it was 1977 and things had changed. I was living in the past.
LC: Was there anybody in the unit who had Vietnam experience?
RK: Yes. There were other Vietnam veterans in the unit. They understood, but
they were helpless. They were helpless to help me because I had cooked my own goose.
LC: Screwed up enough to—yeah. But you really do link this back to your
Vietnam days?
RK: Oh, I do. Oh, yes. Oh, yeah. Yeah. Trying to be machismo and trying to act a certain way. Consequently I—

LC: So you’re unemployed?

RK: I’m unemployed. I worked for Mrs. Kreger number three’s brother for a while in the construction industry.

LC: In Iowa or did you move?

RK: In Iowa. Yes. I stayed in Iowa. I worked in the construction industry in Iowa for a while. Then we befriended a gentleman named Chuck. Chuck got me a job at the power plant at Iowa State University at Ames, Iowa. That was in late ’78, early ’79, and we were—Mrs. Kreger number three and I—were reasonably well together. We were going through some tough times. She supported me and trusted in me and loved me in my stupidity and wanted to see me do better. I was still—I don’t know how you say it—floundering, maybe. I don’t know. Tough words to describe, but I just didn’t have a career. I didn’t know what I was going to be doing.

LC: Tough time.

RK: Yeah. So much had gone right for me and so much had gone wrong for me. I really didn’t know what the next thing was going to be. Again, I don’t want to dwell on it too much here. I remember working at the power plant and it was probably the worst job that a guy could have. I was a cinder man in a coal-fired power plant. The reason I’m saying a lot of these things here for this particular interview is because it relates, I think, very, very directly, Laura, to how I got out of it and making me that man that I am today. I think that’s kind of important to tie that package together as we wrap up the interview. I worked as a cinder man in a coal-fired power plant. I’m in the basement. I worked from 10:00 PM to 6:00 AM in the morning. My job consisted of coming in and punching the clock and going down into the basement of this power plant and opening up boiler doors and raking coals for eight hours. I was not using my head. I had good back muscles. My deltoids and my trapezius muscles quickly improved, but any trained orangutan could have done this job. All I did was manual grunt physical labor. It was dirty. It was dangerous work. I got off shift at 6:00 AM. I’d shower, change clothes. We’d commute back to where we lived in Ankeny, Iowa, have a couple Bloody Mary’s for breakfast and a huge bacon and eggs meal, sleep for a few hours, and go back to work.
at ten o’clock later on. It was that routine. I remembered two things. First, it was Easter
of 1979. My brother and his family had driven down to visit with us from Minnesota.
We were all going to go to church Easter Sunday morning. The guy who was supposed
to replace me never showed up so I had to pull a double-shift. When I called to let them
know that I couldn’t come home my brother must have convinced my wife to drive up to
say hello. So I remember that my brother and his wife and my two nephews walking
down into the basement of this power plant to visit me. My brother looking around and I
could see in his eyes the disappointment that he felt for his brother, his older brother, in
seeing his older brother in this kind of a work environment. We didn’t even have to
speak. I knew what he was thinking. “God, my poor brother, what the hell has he got to
do here? Jesus.” That really hurt. It really hurt me that in a way I’d been found out,
found out to be able to do nothing more than be a cinder man. After all this, now at age
thirty-three or so, this is what the hell I’m doing. I’m raking God damn cinders in a
power plant and my brother saw it. Then not long after that a fire broke out on the
operating room floor. It was a Sunday evening about three o’clock in the morning and
inside one of the turbines a piece of rubber tubing broke. Within a matter of moments we
had a very hazardous fire, a couple million dollars worth of damage upstairs. One of the
last things that I remember crawling around on the operating room floor through that
thick, thick black smoke looking for what they called a crow’s foot so I could close
valves because when a power plant burns up you just can’t run away from it. You got to
shut things down. One of the Iowa State University firefighters grabbing me by the nape
of the neck and the seat of the pants and saying, “Look, you’ve had enough of this
smoke.” He almost literally threw me out through the doors to get out of the building.
None of us—well, one man was—we had five people on shift that night. One man was
transported to the hospital with a little bit of smoke inhalation. The other four of us just
laid around for the rest of the night while the firefighters cleaned up the mess. We got
out of there Monday at about 2:00 PM, went home, showered, had to come back to work
Monday night at 10:00 PM. Worked until Tuesday at 6:00 AM. I went home Tuesday
morning. I looked at Mrs. Kreger number three. I said to her, “You know, I didn’t go
through two years of hell in Vietnam to die in some damn fire in Iowa. I’m going to go
back to school.” At that moment in the summer of 1979 that’s when I started to really,
really change my life. I went back to school full time at a community college. When I
got back to school full time at a community college, Laura, boy, my world just opened
up. This kid who had dropped out of school, this kid who had disappointed his family,
this kid who had done all these stupid things could excel at school. I could compete with
these whippersnappers. I could get As and Bs in my classes. I enjoyed learning. I
enjoyed the empowerment that came to me through education. I enjoyed not being shot
at. I enjoyed not working in a power plant. Hell, I got a couple bucks from the U.S.
government from my G.I. Bill to go to school. Shit. I couldn’t be happier. I could feel
myself growing and changing. I could feel the alcohol leaving my life. I could feel the
violence oozing out of me. It just felt good. It really did. Mrs. Kreger number three was
transferred to Illinois. I stayed behind for a couple months and finished my A.A. degree.
Hell, I got an A.A. with Honors, but never even knew it because I wasn’t concerned
about kind of graduation things. I just was concerned about going to classes and learning
and growing. I moved over to Champaign, Illinois, was where she—we found a place to
live in Champaign, Illinois, which is where she had to work. She was climbing the
corporate ladder in the Singer Sewing Machine Company. I wound up as a commuting
student to Eastern Illinois University in Charleston, Illinois—seventy miles one way, but
I didn’t care. I drove down Monday, Wednesdays, and Fridays and enjoyed my classes.
I got involved in what they called a Board of Governors program down there that allowed
me to get college credit for past experiences. So I wrote up a nice portfolio and got credit
for some of the stuff I’d done in the Army—the good stuff—and was able to complete
my bachelor’s degree in one year. I got my bachelor’s degree in business.

LC: In which year?
RK: 1979, at the end of ’79.

LC: From Eastern?
RK: From Eastern Illinois University in Charleston, Illinois. I was at a little bit
of a low because now I had a bachelor’s degree. Boy, at four years of college boy I was
really feeling kind of full of myself, but I didn’t have a job. I sent out resumes all over
the place and my business, my bachelor’s, is in personnel management. So I had one
five-minute telephone interview from Dresser Industries out of Beaumont, Texas, but
they never called back. I was pretty disappointed. I didn’t know what I was going to be
doing next. When Doug Meyer, wonderful man who had taught me a little bit of
geography at Eastern Illinois University, came to me one afternoon after class. He just
looked in my heart and he looked in my eyes and this is what I tell my students. Excuse
me, I’m getting misty, but there are people who know you better than you know yourself.
That was Doug Meyer for me. He just looked at me and he said, “Have you got a job?” I
said, “No. Hell, no Doug.” “Why don’t you try graduate school?” He just said to me, “I
think you’d make a damn good geographer.” Hell, I couldn’t even spell graduate school
at the time. I didn’t know anything at all about graduate work. He simply said, “Think
about it. Think about it. Let me know what you think.” I went home. I talked with Mrs.
Kreger number three. She was very happy in her position in Champaign. She wasn’t
about to move. I had no job, so we compromised. I bought her a set of living room
furniture and she allowed me to go to graduate school. Doug Meyer simply called his
friend John Jagle at the University of Illinois and set up an interview with me. I’m telling
you, Laura, it was a wonderful experience. He said, “Meet me at John’s house, 405 such
and”—I’m not going to tell the address—“in Urbana, Illinois Thursday. We’re going to
have lunch and we’ll talk about your career.” Together these two men who had been
colleagues and they collaborated on a couple books together. By the time I got to John’s
house for lunch that Thursday they had my first semester at Illinois as a master’s student
all mapped out. I felt so embraced. I felt so welcomed. I felt like a colleague already,
although I wasn’t sure what a colleague actually meant. I mean, I never had to take a
GRE. I never had to do anything. I was suddenly in. I was just there. I was in. I
remember telling one of my English instructors at Eastern Illinois University that I was
going to go to Illinois and what had happened to me. He said, “Man! You just made it!
You’re in the club!” I never realized what that meant until many, many years later. I tell
my Cerritos students the same thing now when they get accepted to law school or they
get accepted to med school or wherever the devil they’re going to go or grad school at
Cal State, Long Beach or whatever the hell it is. When I walked on that campus in
January of 1980 at University of Illinois as a master’s candidate, God, I was in hog
heaven. I mean I was—God, they gave me an office. I could work as a research
assistant. I could work as a teaching assistant. I foolishly turned down the money
because I still had a couple bucks coming in on the G.I. Bill. The younger graduate
students said to the old—I was the oldest graduate student in the department and enjoyed
every moment of that, too, because I had so much life experience that I could bring to my
graduate studies.

LC: Oh, sure. Oh, yeah.

RK: A sense of worldliness about the faculty that they didn’t have, but I
remember the younger graduate students telling me what a fool I was. Well, they didn’t
use the word fool—for not taking a stipend. So I quickly learned how to play that rope
and began working as a research assistant or a teaching assistant and so on. Again,
Laura, I know I’m repeating myself, but it just transformed me. It really did.

LC: What do you think the principal point at issue in the transformation was?
Was it Bob or was it what Bob was applying himself to or was it the people around Bob?
RK: Well, it was the people around Bob and it was Bob’s realization that he
really was something. I don’t want that to sound vain, but to have a sense of self-worth,
to have a sense of accomplishment. My brother had—in my family structure my brother
was always the smart one with an academic scholarship to college. My sister was the
pretty one and the successful one and the level-headed one. Me, the middle baby, I’m the
rebel, and I’d been a rebel since age nineteen. Here I was finally in my middle-thirties
and maybe finally getting some of that rebellion out of me, maybe finally growing up. It
felt good. It felt good to be able to do scholarly work and have that scholarly work
accepted for its value by my peers. It felt good to have the camaraderie and the
collegiality of faculty and other graduate students in an academic setting—to laugh, to
joke. I interacted with Chinese students. I interacted with European students who were
at Illinois. I was becoming more rounded, more educated, more—I don’t know—more
pleased with myself and what I was turning into.

LC: Right. Were there things too that were less, for example, this was less
violent, this was less about—?
RK: Oh, yeah. Yeah, much less violent. There is one other story that I want to
tell that really puts a capstone on things, too I guess, but yeah, much less violent. As I sit
here right now and I look out the window of my office through the lab area. There’s
some kids walking around with their umbrellas, I remember many years ago here at the
campus I had a young man who was straight out of the gangs in Compton. It was a
Tuesday-Thursday morning class that started at 9:30. He told me one day that some days he might be late coming to class because he had to take the bus every morning from Compton. I said, “Look. You just do whatever you need to do, bud. I’m so proud of you for coming to college,” and so forth. I tried to give him all the support. He turned to me one morning and he said, “You know what I hear when I come on this campus over here?” I said, “No. What?” He said, “I hear birds chirping.” That just stopped me in my tracks. He said, “In my neighborhood I don’t hear birds.” I’ll never forget that moment because it is a safe environment. I don’t have to worry about—of course, there is that dreadful fear as a result of how society is changing these days. Gosh I don’t want to get off on that and you’ve got some maniac roaming around the campus. We’ve got our maniacs here on our campus, but it’s a safe environment. When my colleagues bitch about their parking places or my colleagues bitch about the fact that they have to go to a committee meeting, you know—I’m happy to have to walk from my car. My God! I can get out of my car. I don’t care if I park a mile away. You know? Walk a mile through a safe street. Try walking through the jungles. Anyway, long story. Gosh, where to start. I moved back to California in ’87 when I was just finishing with my dissertation. I began my teaching career here in Los Angeles. I taught at a variety of community colleges. I taught at the UC system at UCLA for a short while. I taught at USC. All of that was part-time instruction.

LC: Right. That’s a tough go, too.

RK: Yeah. It was a tough go, but I was very happy with my tough go. Oh, I was so happy. After I taught at USC and UCLA, I mean, the other doors just opened up. It wasn’t long at all before I had a full schedule every semester. I arranged it logistically the best I could to minimize the driving and so forth, but I was changing again and growing. I loved teaching. I loved being at the community college level where I could interact on the front lines with these kids. The area where we draw the majority of our students from, it’s underrepresented minority-group students for the most part who are coming to college from high schools where they don’t get much help. It’s very rewarding socially to empower these kids. It’s frustrating as hell when they don’t know how to do simple critical-thinking skills. They don’t have the necessary tools they need to be successful.
LC: But you can give them those.
RK: I can give them those the best I can. Along the way, along the way, Laura, I began to talk about my Vietnam experience and this can segue into, perhaps, the last story. It began in Illinois when one of my teaching assistants when I was teaching at Illinois said to me. I said, “Well, I’ve run out of material.” He said, “Why don’t you just go into class and talk about Vietnam?” “Yeah?” “Oh, yeah.” So I went into the class and talked about Vietnam and the students just loved it! Well, one thing led to another. As time went by I developed about a three-and-a-half-hour very animated slide show, story-telling show, one-man show, that I would give to my students at the end of every semester just to talk about my life in Vietnam. Talk about—not representing the Army, not representing any veterans groups, but representing a soldier’s point of view of what it was like to be in Vietnam. Actually, it was filmed a couple of times. There was one aspiring Hollywood playwright who came to see it once to think about making it a play, but I’ve never heard back from that guy so that must not have walked very well.

LC: Maybe it did and he made millions and we just don’t know about it.
RK: Yeah, didn’t even tell me, that son-of-a-bitch. But consequently, one time at L.A. Pierce College I gave my little spiel and at the end a very wonderful loving woman came up to me. Jill was her name, flaming red hair, quintessential Jewish mother. She said to me, “You’ve got to let me try to find your children,” because in my story I had told the story of how I became separated from my children and had lost track of them. It was one of those last pieces in the puzzle of my life that had to be solved. I honestly didn’t know whether they were dead or alive. I wanted to find out and yet I didn’t want to find out, if that makes any sense. Jill says to me, and this was in 1990, she said to me, “Let me try to find them.” I said, “Well, Jill, I don’t have any money to pay you for that. I’m not so sure that I’m ready.” “Oh, it’s my hobby. I enjoy trying to find people. If I find them you can buy me a lunch or something like that.” I said, “Well, all right. Go ahead.” So 1990 to 1993 she searched. Up and down this emotional roller coaster we would go. She would telephone me and she’d say, “I think I know where they are. I’m zeroing in on them.” My hopes would get up and I’d worry about what was going to happen and blah, blah, blah. Then she’d call back and she’d say, “Nope. Dead end.” Went through this for about three years, and then in late—actually it was late 1992—she
came to me. She said, “I’ve just exhausted everything. I don’t know where to find them. I’m going to have to give up. I’m so dreadfully sorry that I couldn’t find your children for you.” I thanked her for everything and we had a hug and that sort of stuff. So not long after that, Laura, I’m sitting in my favorite little nearby café where I had breakfast. I’m lamenting to the waitress, Tammy, about the fact that I can’t find my kids. Tammy’s one of these hard-core sort of greasy-spoon-style waitresses, a wonderful loving mother herself, but minces no words type waitress. She said, “Son-of-a-bitch. Why don’t you just call Oprah?” I said, “What?” She said, “Call Oprah Winfrey. She always finds lost people, you jerk.”

LC: Holy crap.

RK: I thought “What? “Call Oprah Winfrey! Don’t come back in here until you call Oprah Winfrey. I’m not going to give you another God damn cup of coffee until you call Oprah Winfrey.” So, I called Oprah Winfrey.

LC: Did you really?

RK: I called Oprah Winfrey. Took me about a week to get through. Finally I got through to one of the associate producers. I explained my story to this associate producer and the person, she was female. I can’t recall her name, very good listener. She said, “Well, Mr. Kreger, it really is a touching story, but,” she said, “I don’t think it’s worthy of national attention and I hope you can understand. We get so many of these types of phone calls. I’m not going to do much with your phone call, but here’s what I want to do for you. Let me give you the name of the private investigator in the L.A. area that we use to find missing people. Will that satisfy you?” I said, “Of course,” because I had no expectations that Oprah Winfrey was going to find my kids for me. Laura, I swear, I called this man on the telephone. We agreed that I didn’t have a lot of money and over the telephone he allowed me to commit orally to two thousand dollars, that I would pay him a hundred bucks a month and he would find my kids. He found them in thirty days. In thirty days, he called me up and he said, “Well, your daughter Kirsten is living in Hawaii with her mother. Your son Greg, he’s working for the Ford Motor Company in Detroit, Michigan.” I could have fallen off my damn chair. “How in the hell did you find these kids?” He said, “Oh, well, I had a colleague of mine in Phoenix pretend to be the father of twins who had gone to high school with your son.” Now, this was all
fictitious. So this PI (private investigator) in Phoenix calls their grandfather, Walter, who
I thought was dead. Now, if I had known Walter was still alive, maybe Jill would have
been more successful. I mean, talk about how things come together at the end. This guy
calls Walter in North Carolina, Durham, North Carolina, and pretends to be the father of
twins who pretended to go to high school with Greg. “Yeah. My boys are—there’s a
high school reunion. My boys are trying to get in touch with their old chums from high
school. They tell me that they remember going to high school with Greg. I can’t get in
touch with his mom. Where is Greg?” “Oh, yeah. Greg’s living in—he’s a big shot with
the Ford Motor Company up there in Detroit, Michigan.” Then the guy goes on and says,
“Well, now didn’t Greg have a younger sister?” “Oh, yeah. My granddaughter,
Kirsten—she’s living in Hawaii with her mother.” Bingo.

LC: Geez. That’s wild.

RK: Yeah. So now, see, another month goes by, Laura, where I’m stewing.
What am I going to do? Long story. I went to a tavern. I got a pitcher of beer. I got a
big jug of popcorn out of the popcorn machine. I had with me a long yellow eight-and-a-
half-by-fourteen legal pad of paper. I had a couple beers, not many, not many, just two,
and a whole bunch of popcorn. I wrote my first wife, ex-wife, a very long letter
explaining to her that I now knew that the kids were alive and that I intended to make
contact with them, but first I wanted to ask for her permission to do so. Although
whether or not you give me permission I’m determined that I want to contact the
children, but I want to give you the opportunity to alert the children to this. Well,
unbeknownst to me the moment after the PI got off the telephone with Walter, Walter
picked up the phone and called his daughter.

LC: Right. In Hawaii.

RK: In Hawaii, saying, “I just had the strangest phone call from some guy in
Phoenix about the kids.” She said, “That’s Bob.”

LC: No!

RK: She said, “That’s Bob.”

LC: Really?
RK: Yeah. She got in touch with her children and said, “Your father is looking for you. Now you guys are adults, you handle it your own way, but your father is looking for you.”

LC: Oh, God! How did you—? That’s wild.

RK: Yeah. Yeah. Isn’t that wild?

LC: Does that fit with what you remember about her?

RK: Yeah. Yeah.

LC: She’s a smarty.

RK: Oh, she’s a smarty. Oh, yeah.

LC: She’s not missing many tricks.

RK: No.

LC: Wow. That’s incredible.

RK: So I sent the letter off to her. She telephoned me. We talked on the telephone. It was a very cordial conversation after all those many years. She told me essentially that she had told the children that I was off living other lives. She never told the children anything bad about me, anything other than the fact that I was just doing my own thing and perhaps not thinking about them, but she didn’t know. One Sunday night I got up the nerve. I called and I spoke with Greg. It was pretty icy. He’s very bitter to this day. We do not have a relationship. He’s very angry with the fact that I abandoned him when he was about two years old, two-and-a-half years old, at his age.

LC: Do you know whether he has any memories of you?

RK: I do not know if he has any memories of me. No.

LC: Two-and-a-half, maybe not.

RK: Yeah, yeah. But we talked and it was as cordial as it could be. I mean, he had some very harsh words for me and he was very blunt with his harsh words. I had to understand that. At the end of that conversation I asked him, I said, “Well, should I call your sister?” He said, “Yes. You better call my sister. She’s expecting your phone call.” She was living in Hawaii. So it was about 9:30 on a Sunday night by then. It was 6:30 in Hawaii. I called right away. Kirsten and I spoke for almost two hours. It was as if, Laura, time had just vanished. It was an astonishing moment in my life, an astonishing telephone call to a young woman who had married very early out of high school, married
not so smartly, divorced, former husband in legal trouble and jail trouble. A single
mother now with a grandson that I didn’t even know I had. Oh, God, and when I found
out I had a grandson, God, boy does that change a man’s life. Jesus! Wow!

LC: I can’t imagine.

RK: Yeah. At the end of this conversation she simply said to me, “You must
come to Hawaii.”

LC: Wow.

RK: I thought, “I’m busy.” I didn’t say that to her, but she simply said, “Every
Mother’s Day we all gather wherever we’re at”—because they were in the military. My
wife had remarried a career—I believe he was in the Air Force, a career Air Force man
who was now retired.

LC: That’s why she’s in Hawaii.

RK: That was why she was in Hawaii and this man had raised the children. I do
not know if he ever legally adopted them or not and none of my business. I’m very
grateful to him. I’ve never spoken to this man. I have always wished him well in my
letters and cards and phone conversations. I’ve invited Kirsten and my former wife,
Barbara, to invite him to speak with me, but I don’t know that they have and I know that
he hasn’t. That’s his choice and one day maybe the time will come when we’re both
sixty-five, seventy years old that it’ll happen. If it does, fine. If it doesn’t, fine as well.
Well, she said, “We always gather and we’re gathering in Hawaii. Greg will be here and
I’ll put it on the charge card. I’ll be there.” So in May of 1993 Mrs. Kreger number three
and I flew to Hawaii. My life changed again. I waited until I was the last person on the
airplane to get off. I walked down the gangplank and the entryway into the little
reception area there at the Honolulu Airport. I quickly panned the room from right to left
and, of course, being the last people off the plane there weren’t many more people left in
the reception area. As I panned around, panned around, panned around I came to my left
over here and there was a young tow-headed blonde boy, seven years old, my ex-wife
who looked older and a little heavier, but hadn’t changed a whole hell of a lot. Her hair
was a little bit gray, but still long as ever. She always wore long, straight black hair.
There next to her was my daughter. Looked just like me, poor girl.
LC: Does she really?

RK: She came over. I’m telling you, Laura, she put her arms around me, embraced me, put a traditional Hawaiian leis around my neck and, God, I just melted. The years just evaporated. It was remarkable. We stood there trembling. She brought Thomas over. Of course, poor Thomas, he didn’t know what was going on. A strange man that he’d never seen hugging his mother and trembling. I said hello to him. I’m crying, she’s crying. Thomas doesn’t know what to do, the poor kid. We made our way out of the airport area to the first bar that we could find. We sat down. Kirsten and I ordered exactly the same beer. Her mother just looked across at my wife and said, “There you go. That’s it.” It was remarkable see because Kirsten had always grown up—Greg grew up I’m sure very bitter and perhaps not filled with much curiosity, but Kirsten was the rebel. Kirsten was just like her father. Kirsten made mistakes. Kirsten married young and all these kinds of things and apparently, although I don’t know all of the story, apparently throughout Kirsten’s life, when Kirsten would do something that her mother disapproved of Barbara would say to her, “God damn it! You act just like your father! You look just like your father.” Kirsten had this curiosity that “Who is this guy that I look like? Who is this guy that I act like?” There we were sitting, you know, at the such-and-such hotel in Hawaii having a beer together. Oh, God. Now we have a very nice relationship, the two of us. Again, like I said, I don’t have a relationship with Gregory. I don’t know if that’s ever going to happen. I would like one day to be able to explain to him why I left North Carolina and my immaturity at that time and my lack of knowledge about those kinds of things. I don’t know that it would do any good in his life. He is now married and he’s raising his own family. As far as I understand he’s a quite successful automotive manager, person kind of guy—financial matters and works arranging those kinds of things. Kirsten, on the other hand, has fallen in her father’s footsteps. I mean, she’s bounced around from education to job, from job to education, and relationships. She’s now doing very well. She is now a medical transcribing technician, works at a nice hospital area.

LC: Wow. She’ll always be able to get a job.

RK: Always be able to get a job.

LC: Wow, if you can do that that’s great.
RK: Thomas, my grandson, is a junior in high school.
LC: I was going to say he’s about ready for college himself.
RK: Oh, he’s a brute! They gave me a picture. I hadn’t gotten a picture from him
in a long time and they gave me a picture for last Christmas. I mean he has no neck. He
loves junior ROTC. He’s an Eagle Scout.
LC: No kidding! Wow!
RK: Yeah!
LC: How cool is that?
RK: Yeah, how cool is that? I haven’t seen him, but I know that he cares for me.
I know that he knows that he has a grandpa in California and that’s enough for me.
LC: He knows you’re there.
RK: Yeah. He knows I’m there. I’ve supported him financially, you know, and
supported Kirsten to some degree. I’m not trying to throw money at them for what I did
in the past, but now that I have the means—for example, I found out that they didn’t have
a computer. Now, big damn deal. I mean, what high school junior doesn’t need a
computer in his home to help him with his homework?
LC: Right. He does need one. Yes.
RK: So, I mean, there was no question. There was no question that I would not
get them a computer. So I mean those kinds of things. Gosh, I guess I’ve come to the
end of the Bob Kreger story. I mean I’m—
LC: Well, I know that it’s not the end, but Bob you’ve been so patient and
authentic in what you’ve shared in the interview that I think it’s an extraordinarily
valuable contribution to what we’re trying to do here. I hope that your family members
over time will seek it out. In any event, I know that researchers will because your
experiences are just amazing. I mean, they’re really amazing. Maybe you don’t think so
because they’re yours but—
RK: You’re right. From time to time it’s kind of a bit of an emotional
dichotomy. When I do step out of myself and look at myself I have to say this has been a
pretty interesting life. You’ve done an awful lot. You’ve been an awful lot of places.
You’ve had multiple marriages. You’ve had different types of life experiences and jobs.
Boy, compared to other people you’ve got a lot of experience, but as you say because
these are mine I’m not always aware of them at a conscious level from sort of a third-

person point of view.

LC: Well, as a teacher I am certain, I have no question whatsoever, that these, the
right turns and the left turns both, contribute to making you a better teacher. I know that
that’s something that you care a lot about. I can only imagine how lucky your students
are and that’s—

RK: Well, that’s very kind of you to say.

LC: There’s no BS there. I really do mean it. I do.

RK: That’s very kind of you to say. Yeah, I have found my niche and I tell my
students that. When I’m depressed and when I’m angered by some of their behavior I
have to keep drawing on the fact that I couldn’t be happier doing anything other than
what I’m doing now. It may not always be successful. I might not always deliver the
best lecture or sometimes my mind might be in other places if I’ve got off-campus
activities that I need to be paying attention to but, damn it, like the Vietnam veterans say,
“What are they going to do? Bend my dog tags and send me back to Vietnam?”

LC: Right. Well, and you’re making a difference in a positive way.

RK: Yeah. I’m just going to continue to do it.

LC: There are students who pass through your classrooms, I’m sure, who—and
this is one of the great things about teaching, isn’t it, that you don’t know. You don’t
know who is the geography professor, who sees you as that geography professor who
changed their life. They may not know it for twenty, twenty-five, thirty years.

RK: Yeah. I’ve got another former student returning again today. She came
back and talking about whether or not to go on to get a Ph.D. She’s finishing up a
master’s now. It’s so rewarding for these former students to come back. A young Latina,
first woman in her family to ever go to college, and now she’s got a master’s degree.

LC: You tell her to go.

RK: She comes back in and she says, “You know, Kreger, you’re just the
inspiration that made me transfer.” You hear these words from former students, whether
they be male or female, or younger or older. I mean, I had a call from a guy just the other
day who when he was a student of mine we talked about fishing and now he wants to take
me fishing again. You know? You develop these lifelong associations outside of the
classroom. I mean, certainly you can’t reach every student by no means at all, but the harder they try to resist me, the harder I push them because I know they’re sitting back in the back of the room with their arms folded across their chests thinking, “This son-of-a-bitch ain’t going to teach me nothing today.” I just get right in their face and I say, “You better change your attitude or you’re never going to go anywhere in life.” These potential gang bangers, they look up at me and I say, “Yeah. You with the hood. You don’t need to wear that hood inside my classroom. Take that doggone thing off. It’s not cold outside.” They just look at me as if I’m from Pluto.

LC: Oh, sure. Oh, I’m sure.

RK: Yes. It’s because, and I tell them. I say, “Look, I’m old enough. I’m crotchety enough. I’ve been through enough in my life that I am not going to tolerate your mediocrity. Now is the time for you to begin to excel and this is the class for you to begin to do it, so change.” They do. I don’t know. I’m blowing smoke up my own—

LC: Well, actually no. I mean, I think this is an important part of teaching that if you expect more and you communicate that to them there are, within any group, kids who wouldn’t respond to anything other than expectations. Some of them have never had much of that in their lives. It’s a terrific thing that you’re doing in terms of sharing your experiences, Bob. I want to thank you for sharing all the time that you have with me and with the Oral History Project here. Your contribution is an extraordinarily valuable one. I hope that you realize that and can here that, because I’ve interviewed a lot of people.

RK: Well, I want to thank you, too, personally, Laura.

LC: My pleasure.

RK: I will come visit you. That is a promise. I’m probably going to try to surprise you. I won’t give you too much warning.

LC: Excellent! Even better. Good.

RK: The opportunity to participate here in the program has been very rewarding and fulfilling to me. I’ve talked about it to heaven knows, anybody who’ll listen to me about it. They know how it has changed me to participate in this and to become a part of history. You have been so generous and kind and compassionate. It’s just a wonderful experience. I will continue to talk about it. I will continue to try to get other veterans that I come in contact with to participate.
LC: Thank you. Thank you, Bob.

RK: I don’t know what more to say other than “thank you.”

LC: How about I’ll say thank you and we’ll conclude the interview here.

Thanks, Bob.

RK: All right.