Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an interview with Chaplain
Russel J. Carver on the 20th of April, 2001 at approximately 3:40 Lubbock time. We are in the International Cultural Center at Texas Tech University. Sir, why don’t we begin with a brief discussion of your early life and if you could, just tell us when and where you were born and where you grew up?

Russel Carver: I was born in 1929 in Amarillo, Texas. My parents are Roy and Stella Carver. Both parents have had what you would call pioneer experience of having gone in covered wagons from one part of the State of Texas…actually, my maternal family went from near Denton to Leer County, which is near Shamrock. That was a two-leg trip from 1889 to 1900. She was born in a half dug out up there. My father was born in Indian Territory, [?] in Oklahoma. When he was ten, he drove one of the two covered wagons through the Northeastern Panhandle near Canadian. So, a lot of pioneer experience in my family background. But, I cherish a great deal about that, the museums around here in the panhandle or something I understand very much. Spiritually, I like to refer to the fact that my maternal grandmother was born in Yoshun, Indiana, Oakheart County, and was at that point a member of the German Baptist which are known as the Dunkards, people who came to…that church was founded in 1707 by a man named Alexander Mack in Germany. But, because he was neither Lutheran or Catholic, there was those groups were persona non grata from the reformation era and often times were
targeted with hostility, prejudice, and even persecution by the established churches in that neighborhood. So, they very soon came to what was then the colonies but with the Revolutionary War they were persona non grata, and again, as a peace church so they went to the northwest territory and from there that family migrated to Nakona which is [?] that she and my grandfather were married and moved to Indian Territory. The reason I mention that is because when you’re not a part of an establishment, and that’s kind of in you, it seems to be easier to take a position that it’s not necessarily the accepted line or the party line. You don’t have to be kind of a company person, or my country right or wrong, that kind of thing. Spiritually that comes through my paternal grandmother, my father’s mother, in that heritage. I enjoy that a great deal.

SM: When you were growing up, did your parents tell you a lot of stories about their covered wagon trips?

RC: My brother wrote a high school theme paper about the migration of my mother’s family and that’s been part of our family documentation where coming from the Vernon area and got stuck in the Pease River and had to get help and went to Crowel and stayed two years there and going to the panhandle and the years in the dugout, yeah. So, stories are particularly on my mother’s side. We make a lot of those stories.

SM: What did they do when they arrived here?

RC: My father was a school teacher and he was first a classroom teacher but he had a hearing disability and until he was 60 and he got surgery and got normal hearing, but before that he was a home bound teacher. That seemed to work better for him with his disability up until his surgery. My mother was a homemaker. There are five of us siblings, four of us survived. The youngest one is the sister who died several years ago. So, I have two adopted sons who are grown. I’m a single man at this point.

SM: As you were growing up and since your father was a teacher, did that help with your own education in terms of being able to come home and…

RC: Schooling was very natural to go to school. He encouraged us to make good grades and we did make good grades, until my computer course!

SM: But, that’s more recent!

RC: I think the person who was probably projecting me toward the divinity school was a man who I did not take a course from, a guy named Lemoin Lewis. He was
himself a graduate of Harvard Divinity who one time through a happenstance drive from Abilene to Fort Worth, we didn't go up there that far for some reason. He said, “Had you thought of this?” and I hadn’t. At that time I was getting ready to go to some seminary probably because I didn’t have anything better to do. So I went and this really brought a special focus to my life.

SM: What was this point in your life? How old were you?
RC: 1952, when I was a senior. No, before I graduated.
SM: From Abilene Christian?
RC: Yes.
SM: But in terms of being, did you do well in school as a young person?
RC: Did I what?
SM: Did you do well in school, in high school and whatnot?
RC: Yes. I wasn't valedictorian or anything like that, but I was good in classes; lots of As and Bs. Not many Cs.
SM: Did it help having a father who was a teacher to do well in school?
RC: Yes.
SM: Amarillo, what was the population of Amarillo like back then?
RC: I remember when we were in grade school 43,000. It’s now, what, 200,000? It’s grown. At one point I think Amarillo could have had Texas Tech but the political people up there somehow lost the decision.
SM: Is there anything else that was important? For instance, what made you decide to go to Abilene Christian?
RC: From the time I was even a pre-schooler I admired the minister. You talk about a model. I always, always wanted to be a minister. Even in my adult life when I thought, “Could I change? Would I change?” I am who I want to be, and that’s only enhanced by the fact that I am a soldier preacher, as I had said earlier. This is where I belong. There are other hospitals that I work at but the VA is where I really fit. When they opened the national cemetery, I knew where I was going to be buried! The other thing, and this is jumping ahead considerably, joining the National Conference of Vietnam Veteran Ministers which is where Harvey is an associate member I think it is, we have two or three levels of membership and I’m a full member. But, in 1990 I joined
this and it was again kind of a happenstance thing and I went to that conference. I think it was held in Washington D.C. The founder and president is a man named Phil Asawa. He is chief of the VA Chaplains in Boston. He’s the one who knows Jonathon Shay. Anyway, in that very first meeting I heard about the stress of combat. I heard about PTSD. At that point, at that point, I brought a focus of my ministry around trauma, combat trauma first, usually Vietnam but not uniquely so. It can be…I know some Gulf War people, I know World War II people who are traumatized by their experience. But then of course domestic violence, child abuse, terrorism, all of those things from what I’m gathering from looking more into trauma come from major stress and altered brain chemistry or structure or function, from what I’m hearing at this international conference of dramatic stress studies. It really not only will have the direction to focus on stress, but I feel that I have more to say than some people might have because of the enrichment of what I know from my Vietnam minister colleagues and then the other experiences that I had participated in. I joined this international society as a member there, too, because it’s just really important to keep up with that sort of thing.

SM: Yes, sir. Well when you graduated from Abilene Christian or when you were getting close to graduation, before you were approached about the possibility of attending Harvard Divinity, what were your plans or what were your tentative plans?

RC: Let me tell you about the Bible faculty that were there. They rather blessed those of us who were ministry students to go to very conservative seminaries if we were going to do that. Southwestern Baptist Theological was kind of on limits. Perkins and SMU was questionable and Chicago was questionable. Anything on the Eastern Seaboard was really questionable. Only this one professor, Lamoin Lewis, who was, as I said, I never took a course from him, he said that this would be a fine thing to do. This really kind of connects with that story about my paternal grandmother because I didn’t have to do what everybody else does because it’s what ministers in the Church of Christ do in their preparation. I could do something different if I chose to. I have taken more and more satisfaction in my ministry as I’ve grown to be comfortable with being alone if I took a position. I don’t need to stand out and be different and odd, but it seems to be necessary to a person’s integrity at some points to be able to say, “I know what the majority says but this is who I am.” As far as Vietnam is concerned, I think I need to
inject that from time to time. I go to my own congregation in Dallas which is the Preston
Oak Church of Christ and occasionally I’ve had the opportunity to say Vietnam and
frequently get the comeback, “That’s history.” Oh no, I will see someone when I go back
to the hospital tomorrow or the next time I’m there for whom the war is present and will
be as long as they live. It’s not a closed issue or a piece of museum history. Vietnam is
today. I don’t think people necessarily understand who haven’t really thought
through…this is one of those unexamined things. Of course I’m delighted to come here
to the Vietnam Center and have the material and the experiences laid out so that the
aliveness of this war is kept very much alive. I hope that will outlast any of us who are
here now because I really do think that the Vietnam War was a defining experience in
American History. It was that with the Kennedy Assassination reminded us that we have
a shadow side, a dark side, and we will be better off to admit that. That doesn't mean that
we have to give up any of our idealism under the negative graces that are in such
abundance here. I love the immigrant origins that we have. I think we need to make our
peace not only with blacks but with Native Americans and with women. I think
that…but we need to know Vietnam in what surrounded it, the assassinations, not only of
Kennedy but of Diem. That’s where America is short. We can look at our 58,000 names
but we don’t realize there are 300,000 or maybe a million or whatever. It’s a million give
or take of their dead in Southeast Asia and we have our two or three thousand MIAs and
they have 300,000. It ill behooves us in the family of nations, a global situation, to be so
peroquial and so restricted in our view that we don’t see that people are out there. The
fact that their cultures might be quite different doesn't make them less meaningful to
them. Our imperialistic mission programs in our churches, for example, need to rethink
theology so that we can make more space for these people who are children of God. That
doesn’t mean that I am less committed to my Christian faith. Happily when I was at
Harvard I found that people could be very Christian and yet give great value to
everybody else who is not Christian. I’m not just talking about Jews and Muslims. I
think we need to make a special peace with Jews and Muslims as Christians because
we’re all children of Abraham. But, I think all of us children need to be seen as equal in
his love.

SM: When you talk about missionary activity, had you ever thought of doing that
yourself?

RC: Yes. I was in Massachusetts. I went there for school. When I graduated I
was a home missionary so to speak because we don’t have many Churches of Christ in
New England and I was that for a while and I have out of that experience and the things
that I’ve learned, in fact on the way out here I listened to a tape by Episcopal Bishop
Spawn who is well published in which he said, “I’m not in the conversion business, I’m
not into the missionary business.” That wasn’t that he didn’t have a statement of faith
about Jesus Christ that is very personal, very viable to him, and very willing to be shared.
In another sense was that first among equals, I’m better than anybody else, none of that
exclusiveness. Top bottom, up down sort of thing. I’m coming to that more and more
and that leaves me plenty of good news to say about my faith, but it doesn't require that I
ever put anybody down or pass ultimate judgment on anybody because that’s way too big
a job for this small human. That’s God’s business.

SM: Now when you were attending Abilene Christian, what did you find most
challenging about that training, that school?

RC: I will tell you what I found curious but not particularly challenging. I
majored in New Testament language which was Greek but the fact that we did not look
into the classics, into Classical Greek, I found that curious. We did kind of go outside
biblical coine, but I think that’s been somewhat directed at this point. In fact, I was in
college with a man named Everett Ferguson who is now retired from the ACU faculty,
and one of the finest scholars you will find anywhere, very attune to the Greek text. I put
my energy other than in biblical studies, but that doesn't mean that at this time in my life I
could not open up a text and begin where I need to be and just go right ahead because
that’s one thing that helps. I’m 71 years old, and if I live to be 100 I want to be still in
process at that point. I know people of various disciplines of various professions who
seem not to have read much of the books since the last diploma and that comes back to
what you’d said earlier, that Americans are not terribly introspective and I think we need
to look at the fact that nations like Russia, read all the time…and perhaps there’s not the
same degree of hope for their future as we had for ours but ours could be so much more
deeply enriched and continued to look as long as we live at what’s out there, and where
we’ve come from.
SM: I’m curious, your work at Abilene Christian, did you do comparative research, that is looking at some of the original text and looking at different versions of the New Testament, the King James Version and whatnot?

RC: I don't think a lot about that. It’s not that I’m a bad member of the Church of Christ but I think I’m a little bit different because of where all I’ve gone and where all I’m going.

SM: Well this is almost 50 years ago, so I’m asking you to dig deep.

RC: I’ll tell you one very negative thing in a moment and how that’s been corrected. It was mostly, as far as the New Testament Greek was concerned, we read the text and most of the New Testament, some from the [?] Old Testament translation into the Greek. As far as the Bible courses were concerned, they were pretty content, learning the content, and I won’t take anything from that. We were just beginning with theology. There was an apologetics course that I took in my senior year and I’ve had to find my own apologetic. Being a Christian has not been easy for me because I’ve questioned too many things and had too many questions put to me, but that doesn’t mean I’m any less…I’m more committed but trying to be open and still have convictions and that kind of thing. The negative I was going to tell you about is that the admissions policy at Abilene Christian in those days, ’48 to ’52, still did not permit black people to receive credit. There was the minister of the Treadway Boulevard Church of Christ named Bowser, a very saintly sort of guy, and he would come and sit in on our classes but was not able to get credit. At that point there was an ACU board blessed the founding of school for blacks in Terrell, Southwestern Christian College. The wonderful sequel to that was that Royce Money who is the current president and one of the board members went over to Terrell here it must have been a year and a half ago in November, and in there with the student body assembled and with the faculty conveyed an apology for that decision. We took a step forward when we did that, and we needed to.

SM: Just out of curiosity, when you were reading the original…this was the original Greek that you were reading, and then based on what you had heard previously in the Bible and what you read subsequently, was there anything that you noticed, anything interesting, in terms of interpretations that other people had made because no interpretation is typically perfect because so much is…
RC: My questionings have not been so much around the linguistics and
discoveries. I read something in the book in the car that I just finished about how in the
Old Testament for instance there’s 100 times when God sends his people out to kill other
people, and a number of times with no particular reason except to just annihilate them. A
passage in the end of 137th Psalm, “Happy shall thy person be who dashes Babylonian
babies heads against a rock,” which even in the Christian pericophy these are readings
that some churches had. We don’t have, but the electionary, when they come to 137th
Psalms, a beautiful Psalm up to that last verse, they just don’t include that in the reading
for that particular assigned subject. The thing I’ll use is like you say, here Elysha went
out and he killed 450 preachers that he didn’t agree with. Can you imagine me going
around Dallas and finding 450 preachers that I didn’t agree with that I’d kill? What do I
do with the text when that’s there? Well I leave it there because it’s kind of like maybe
like the flag of Mississippi. That’s there. It’s kind of like Mark Twain using the “N”
word. It’s there and we don’t have to approve of those kinds of things about the dark side
of our history may need to be there. So, I’m okay with letting that be there. There are
New Testament texts that need to be revisited. Happily, I find fewer of those in the New
Testament. I think that what I find is Christian Theologians have said, “This is what that
means,” and what they were doing was not reading for primary information, and they
could have in many cases. They were imposing neoplatanism or they were imposing
something that came out with certain things that are really not there. In what Jesus said
or what Paul or some of the other writers said…some of these thoughts are pretty new for
me; what I mean is these specific thoughts are kind of new to me.

SM: As you were going through your training at Abilene Christian, were there
topics of discussion like the difference between or one of the principal differences
between of course the Old Testament and the New Testament, the emphasis I guess you
could say of being the Yahweh versus the God that is depending on your particular
perspective part of the Trinity?

RC: Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

SM: Yes, sir, so there not necessarily being separate Gods, but there is
delineation.

RC: That was touched on. The more characteristic thing was you’d find someone
putting forth how you would harmonize difficult passages. I don’t try to harmonize
difficult passages. I say it’s a difficult passage and that’s the way I’m going to say it. I
may say maybe the Rabis or the text writers had a purpose for doing that. I think the
binding of Isaac, if God told me to raise a knife to my son and I ain’t going to do that. I
don’t consider that an example of how one shows obedience or faith that is anything I
would want to emulate. That’s where their core doctrine for all three faiths, Judaism,
Islam, and Christianity. Here again, I know I’m by myself a lot of times but that’s okay.

SM: I should have asked you this earlier; how well were you able to get to know
your grandparents?

RC: My grandfathers both died around 1937 and I preached a sermon about each
of my grandparents, gave a sermon. I’ll tell you a little bit about them. My mother’s
mother, she was a true pioneer woman. When she was 75 she was out there digging
postholes and putting fence up and driving teams of horses, harvesting maize. A couple
of my other boy cousins would spend the summers out there and I spent three summers.
Man alive, she was really a stalwart. Her husband, that grandfather, he read a lot but he
would get on what I would say would be a hobby and he was really very rigid, stubborn,
when he would take a position and alienate people and make people mad. At one point
was this fellowship by this little church that they were a member of and so that sermon I
called the wounded son which was already after my Vietnam minister thing because that
really hurt him very deeply and I don’t think he ever recovered from that. Both
grandfathers, both grandfathers and the maternal grandmother were very strict
disciplinarians – not my father – and survival gave them permission or it was interpreted
that they could be very hard disciplinarians. That went to all the children. There were
big families. There were nine or ten in each family. But, that kind of thing I have come
to really…I think needs to be upgraded. If I have a second focus of trauma in my
ministry, it’s for child abuse. Many of our Vietnam veterans who had been stressed out
in combat also have had very abusive childhoods. I’m deviating from your question
about the grandparents. My father’s father was a child in Kentucky before the family
moved or maybe he and his brothers moved down to North Texas. When he finished the
third grade his mother took him out of school to help with the tobacco harvest and he
never went back. That was okay in those days. But, the remarkable thing was, and this
may touch on the influence my father had on me, when my dad was about 17 grandpa said, “Let’s go down to Canyon.” They lived in Glazier, which is east of Canadian.

“Let’s go down to Canyon. We may want to buy a place down there,” so they did, and he did. They bought a home and my dad and my Uncle Grover, my aunt and uncle all went to West Texas Normal which is now Texas A&M Canyon. It was a teacher’s normal, teacher’s school, and all of them became teachers and before that my father may have been a [?] like my grandfather who was very industrious, very providing, but not very warm and personal. Neither one of my grandfathers were terribly personal. The warmth and gentleness of my father’s mother, I was in pre-school, she had arthritis and I wanted a playmate and I couldn’t be bothered with her arthritis. I needed a playmate! She was a darling. My mother’s mother, she was a real go-getter. She was really interested in education. She sent her oldest son off, wiping the tears sent him off without her husband’s knowledge, got him on a train. He took his stuff out to the end of the field in the evening and the next day when he went plowing with his brother or something he went out there and he got his things and went and took the train from Shamrock where he was because it would have been against my grandfather’s will because sons were so important in that kind of farming that you just couldn’t do it by yourself and survival was that big of an issue with him. It was some very touching, poignant kind of things that I remember but she had to school him. When she was 83 she broke her hip and she died a week after that, but she was in school at Eastern New Mexico University taking a course in English and Art. So, I have this in me from three different sources.

SM: How did your grandfather respond when he found out that she had helped him?

RC: He was very kind of a stoic sort of a guy. But, I think that he…this is a hunch, but some things my aunt said, he saw the pleasure of his children until he would come in the room and then a quiet would settle over him. She said that he looked like he was terribly hurt that he was not included. I expect that, “[Reralee?], how could you do this?” or if he blamed his wife, I don’t know, or, “How could this happen when my understanding of how I should live life and how we should live life, how can you let somebody go off to school this way and not make a living?” I imagine it was a very painful thing for him, I just don't know.
SM: I guess we should probably take a break. Now how long did it take you to
make up your mind about going into Harvard Divinity School once the idea was
presented?
RC: I was in my senior year and that would have probably been in the spring and
I went that fall.
SM: So the acceptance was very quick as well?
RC: Yes, because Dean Sperry was still the dean and the school had declined as
far as enrollment. I think in my class there were only 12 people. It’s much larger now.
But, so it was not difficult and I got some financial aid, that kind of thing. I was also a
minister to the senator they called it, so that’s where I began the home mission work and I
was associated with one of our small churches, in a home as a matter of fact, and since
got a building. It didn’t take long because I knew I wanted to go someplace. It wasn’t a
hard decision.
SM: Had you traveled much out of the Amarillo area, except of course when you
went to Abilene Christian?
RC: No, not really. I guess New England was my first big going away. When I
got transplanted there, that was a very freeing experience. It took three or four years as I
told you. I am going to, with the Plano Civic Chorus, to the A Cav. next year for a series
of concerts and when that’s over with well I’m going to stay and I’m planning to go to
Latvia which is a partner city with Dallas and they have a singing thing, that ensemble is
so large that there is no indoor place to do it, so they had to do it outdoors so I want to
hear that music. Then I also want to go to Prague and Wittenburg to see Luther with the
[95 BCs] on the door and [?] Vienna, I want to go to heaven in Vienna. It’s the most
beautiful city I’ve ever been in.
SM: Before you went to Harvard, had you even been to any of the major cities in
Texas like Dallas?
RC: I’d been to Dallas. Had I been anywhere else? That’s about it.
SM: So this is really quite a new experience for you?
RC: When we were very small my dad got a doctorate degree from a university
in Greeley, Colorado and two summers we went up there. That was almost be it before
my memory. I took a high school choir tour that took us to El Paso, but never really
much traveling until I got to be an adult.

SM: What was it like, that transition from a lot of respects the rural Texas environment and limited exposure to city Texas to New England and big-city Boston?

RC: Initially I was rather caught up with the studies and of course the minister in the vicinity took me to [Molden Mass?] weekly or maybe more than that. I felt like I had a place to belong in that little church, like I still had friends who are members of that congregation. So, I felt like I had kind of a community and in the Church of Christ we do have a rather closeness. I was traveling in Wyoming once and stopped for church one Sunday morning and met the grandson of some people that I lived with when I was selling Bibles after I was a freshman, and that was in Oklahoma where I sold the Bibles. They took me to dinner. What I’m saying is there’s really a sense of community in our congregations and I love that. I didn't feel that I was without some kind of support. On the other hand, the conservatism that has been so noticeable in Churches of Christ, and certainly in those days, I don’t think the people necessarily understood what I was about; I didn’t understand myself very well. I was coming to terms with something so very different and that was a hard thing. That may have been part of the difficulty in getting myself as I said use the word transplanted because Harvard was so very, very different and I was warned, “You will lose your faith and you will leave the church if you go to Harvard.” This is the Bible staff. I didn’t make that clear enough a while ago.

SM: This is the Abilene Christian Bible faculty?

RC: The send off was, “We’ll lose you because we’ve lost people before.” I don’t have very much of a calling card to go back to that Bible department. They’ve all changed and all that. I like the chorus there, I’ve participated in choral activities, and it’s not quite as dire as I make it sound because Everett Ferguson is there. But, he did the same thing I did.

SM: So when you left, that’s what the warning was?

RC: That was the warning, yeah, and that has never felt good. It’s not the last time I met what I think is conservatism. This time it was Austin Presbyterian Seminary, whether I need to put this on here or not!

SM: If you want to take a moment and explain the story off the record? I’m curious, what did you focus on in your studies at Harvard?
RC: There was a basic course. Harvard is history; Harvard has focused on
history, History of the religions. So, there was early church history, late church history,
and Old Testament, New Testament, Systematic Theology and History of the religions
and very much into History. When I spoke earlier out at the Church of Christ one of my
minister colleagues who left us has a doctorate in Theology, and I think he needs to read
history. I told him, I said, “My ancestors were prosecuted by Penetarians who were
Lutherans and Calvanists and you’re trying to get me to confess the Trinity?” You may
be a Trinitarian, but Lutherans and Catholics, good Trinitarians and the Church of Christ,
we’ve never taken the creed. “No Creed But Christ,” is one of our slogans, and I just
never found it necessary. When I came to the text in scripture, again, the primary source,
I find reference of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. But as far as the
doctrine that was generated at the Constantine, his blessing with [?], that is the four
century statement is not in the New Testament, and I’m sorry, and I told him that. I said,
“Too many of my relatives faced persecution in other centuries.” Somehow that didn’t
go into his head. That’s what I think about this Center. I think that history doesn’t seem
to go into the heads of a person like McNamara. Even some of the things I’ve heard, and
we were over there and the advisor, we were there to be the big brother, that comes
across way too loud. When I know that 1870s that we were invited to help out in
Southeast Asia and didn’t do it, and in the Wilson there was a delegation who came, we
can’t bother and the little brown brothers and the Great White Fleet. All of these are
vague things but they’re there and all it could be is just open the history text and I could
point it for anybody that wanted to know. We have had this looking-down attitude, this
paternalistic attitude. If anything needs to be exploded in our face…see, that’s what I
think Vietnam is supposed to do for us is to make us realize that we have to be more
reflective and introspective or else we’re going to get caught in more of these things.
How long can we do something like the Gulf War and get away with it? We’ve go the
whole Arab world mad as hell at us, the terrorism. Two days ago or whatever, the 19th,
high security all around because the anniversary is the terrorist’s day of choice to
terrorize again. I know people that are here. I met an Iranian just last night, and we
didn’t talk about this, but I can go back this evening and visit with him and I’ll bet you
that I can find him reporting on the disillusion of Muslim/Islam people, and certainly
Jordanians. Iran is a little different than the other Arab states. We’ve made so many people mad at us and we don’t even know it. We think it’s okay. If Jim could ever get us all to know how much more we need to be modest and belonging Democratically to the global community, big monuments can be registered to Jim Reckner at his gravesite. I think he’s got a vision and surely he does have some sense of that. Who’s listening? Well, someone’s listening, and the students are listening. Maybe the 21st Century will give us a better handle. We don't need to kill another 109 million people in the 21st Century like we did in the 20th; not that the US did all that of course, Hitler and Stalin did the bulk of it, but our hands are bloody too.

SM: I’m curious about some of the reading that you might have done between finishing at Harvard Divinity and joining the Army, in particular a rather interesting book The Ugly American was published around 1959. Did you have an opportunity to read that during the time period, before you went in the Army, or did you read it subsequent to your service in Southeast Asia?

RC: I probably read it afterwards. I focused a lot of energy, and this is a personal note, on my marriage, which failed. That could be a lot further along in achievement kinds of things if I had not given so much energy to that which didn’t succeed anyhow. But, we’re talking about 25 years. But, when you said readings, the reading that has been exceedingly important to me in recent time, and it’s related from the writing of Alice Miller who as far as I’m concerned is the world’s greatest authority on child abuse. I have had an experience with one of my colleagues just this week who has been abused as a child, and calling her to look at what happened then to deal with that so that her ministry can be not…it seems to me she’s put a cap on her ministry. She’s a fine chaplain, but if she will deal with that then she will have new opportunities for growth. I feel very much the same way about my former wife; if she will ever deal with the core of the trauma of her childhood, her options will be great. Vietnam veterans, same thing. I see them dying when I do and a lot of them are pretty sick. Of course their dual diagnosis as you probably know they come almost always with substance abuse and PTSD and many times bipolar or clinical depressions. When you listen to Mary Nguyen she’ll be talking about that. She may not say it in a way that I would, but she’ll be talking about that. We had one retreat at the Vietnam Veteran Minister’s Conference when our
presenter talked from the passion of Jesus this way. He said, “Father forgive me for they
know not what they do. My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me,” and those are
words that get translated into Vietnam veteran’s vocabulary. But, Jesus had another word
and that was, “Into your hands I commit my spirit,” and that is the one where you deal
with your nightmare, and many Vietnam veterans never get there. Many traumatized
people never get there, “Into your hands I commit my spirit,” because what that means is
when you’re going to die in a few minutes as Jesus, or if you’re going to live with your
nightmare for 20 years, that is a decision that gets made that separates those who are
into…how do I say it? Unfulfilled is maybe as good a word as any, and those who can
say in spite of this terrible trauma I can walk in as a healed person or as a whole person,
as a completed person, and I’m hesitant about that because healing is a relative term, but
fulfilled perhaps is a better term. But Alice Miller in the Little Sheep that…I don’t hand
out church extracts from people like Alice Miller or from the Patience Mason. Do you
know Patience Mason? She’s the wife of Robert Mason who wrote Chicken Hawk.

SM: Yes, okay.

RC: She’s in our conference and she addresses particularly Vietnam wives. An
extract from her book, I pass this out or from Dusty Miller’s Hello David, My Name is
Dusty. Nguyen will talk about nursing and all the Vietnam nurses know that story and
that point. Trauma is going to be with the traumatized as long as they live. Whether they
can ever say that or find that commitment to a faith that will lead them to transcend that
or not is the big spiritual question in my judgment. I can’t stand over people and say,
“You’ve got to do it,” because it is a decision. I can only wish for that to happen and
pray that…

SM: Yes, sir. While you were training at Abilene and Harvard, how much did
they talk about war and how as Christians you either should or should not approach it?

RC: If I had gone with my age group, I would have gone to Korea, and some of
my high school friends did lose their lives there and they did go, and I’ve noticed that in
my high school reunions because I’ve gone to most of them. But, the ministry students
got a 4-D classification because they were ministers. I don’t know why preacher students
are accorded that and other professions aren’t. The military has enough chaplains and
doesn’t have enough doctors or lawyers, whatever. I don’t know what that’s about. But,
anyway I really did wrestle with pacifists and I suspect I would have thought of myself as a pacifist. My older brother was in Fort Chaffer in World War II and he appealed for a transfer to a non-combatant position. He was a chaplain’s assistant or a medic, one or the other, in Italy in the end of World War II. It was never a big deal in my family. I’m sure my mother’s side, that would not have been much of an issue. My father’s side, my grandmother perhaps, but it never was taught much in the family. But, when I went to Harvard my roommate was a member of the Society of Friends and he really talked to me, you can well imagine. The practical thing is when I got to the end of being a home missionary, I was about to starve, so I needed some sort of…I took the practical thing and went to the military where I could get a salary! So, you can call me an opportunist there, and I probably was. However, I don’t usually make those spiritual leaps without getting around to thinking about it sooner or later. We cannot be separated from that which is what we disapprove of in society because we belong to society or the powers that be. There’s a spirit of a corporation, a family, a nation, a culture. There’s a spirit, which the New Testament language speaks of principalities and powers, and this spirit can take captive of you and serve the purposes of an elite set. I think you see that in our politics very graphically where you have to have a war chest of 75 million dollars to get elected. But, that’s who I am. I’m going to have either the democrat or the President. Consequently I voted for a third party candidate, which is characteristic of what I would do, “Oh you wasted your vote, or you voted for Gore?” and I said, “Oh no I didn’t. I did exactly what I wanted to do.” And I didn’t lose my vote, but I got to make a statement. Those issues will come up later. But, I really wrestled with this and 1962 is when I got my commission. I was very okay with that. On the other hand, I often tell people this language, that I was really was in the Army for a year before I joined it because I thought I was going to turn the Army into my church. It wasn’t going to be exactly a Church of Christ but it would be my church. Finally it dawned on me that the Army is never going to be a church. The Army is the Army, and the preacher is not going to be center front uplifted. That’s going to be the commander! This very congregational experience in the Church of Christ, which I’ve had, didn’t teach me what I would learn as an Episcopalian or Catholic or even a Methodist because lines of command, chain, organization, is not all that prominent in congregational settings. So, I’m very much colored by the
congregational democracy and craziness that is in the Church of Christ. Now I’m
wanting to help some of the people that I know to look at that, but that was another thing.
I talk about transplanting into New England and the Vietnam Ministers. Getting over or
coming to appreciate the structure that you find in the military was a hard lesson for me
to learn, but I learned it and I know less democratic and very casual way, sloppy way that
we’ve done in the Church of Christ like we are, but I heard Gerald Turner who is the
president of SMU who is a member of the congregation where I worship, we have a Bible
study and I can’t see how these Methodists do all this. I’m so glad I’m not a part of all
that. Well, he’s a part of the sloppiness! He’s not only that because he couldn’t be the
president of SMU and a Canbelite(?!) at that without some sense of organization, and you
have to understand that as I’m saying it. I really appreciate structure. But, that was
something I had to get and that was not an easy thing to come by. [?] I was [rifled?] from
the surface probably because I didn’t understand the chain of command until after I got
out of the Army. I don’t mind confessing my sins!

SM: I don’t know if that’s a sin though.
RC: What?
SM: I don’t know if that’s a sin.
RC: Well, ignorance I wouldn’t call a virtue! I think moving from conservatism
and so I have a friend who she and I were in Abilene together. She was a year behind
me. She was in drama, but she was so tight theologically she couldn’t commit herself to
go into acting although she should have. She could have gone to Hollywood in a minute.
She was afraid she’d have to reveal too much skin or say a healthy, “Damn!” and she
wouldn’t do that! So, but somehow we clicked, especially when she found out I was safe
enough not to be heavy into romance. This was ten or 12 years ago. But, I would go into
these republican gatherings in Dallas. Somehow she’d trust that I’d behave myself, and I
usually did. I didn’t ever embarrass her there. If you ever have a need to be quiet about
any degree of liberalism, it’s certainly in Dallas/Fort Worth, and even more so in
Amarillo. But anyway, she would really take in after me. She would just let me know if I
fouled up theologically. Then I would get back at her and one time I said, “Now you say
we’re supposed to take the Lord’s Supper every Sunday?” That’s my New Testament
example. She said, “You could take the Lord’s Supper even if you don’t get to church.
You could find a member of the Church of Christ and you could take communion on Sunday. Every Sunday you could do this,” so she wanted me to take communion every Sunday. I said, “Dob,” I said, “Sometimes in the winter when I come to church here and we have communion both morning and evening, evening for those who don’t go in the morning, it’s over after sundown,” and I said, “According to the Jewish way of counting, they began not at midnight but at sundown. So, if I take communion in the winter after dark, I take it on the first day of the week or the second,” and she got so mad at me. I said, “I can out liberal anybody who got in the pulpit here, almost anybody who got in the pew, but don’t try to kick me out of this church!” I think I quoted that at the… I’m not sure, at her eulogy, but that’s the way I feel. There is within me this very interesting combination of conservatism and liberalism, and I love that because I don’t have to go off on some crusade that is typical of some liberals. I’m not a card-carrying member of the ACLU. I like a lot of the things they do; on the other hand, I don’t have to go whole hog because there are some really conservative things about me and I like that. But, that richness goes back to the New England experience both at Harvard and the splitting of the tickets and mentality that I saw there. It feels better to me to leave options open rather than say, “I need to be one way.”

SM: When you were going through your training, again, both at Abilene and at Harvard, were there discussions about social, political, and religious issues and where they merge, especially in American society, in particular things like the separation of church and state and the emphasis of that in our culture?

RC: That we didn’t really talk about perhaps at Abilene. But, soon in the ‘60s because we were really getting into social ethics and the nation, of course it was reflected in theological discussion and periodicals at the time, there was a division between those who had a personal religious experience and those who were into social ethics. That kind of water shed made itself very clear I think about the ‘60s and the Church of Christ in Abilene, as it’s expression in those days, was not into social ethics environment, women’s liberation. In fact, we still have a stumbling thing there. I’ve told you about the racial thing from Abilene. They were very, very much into personal religion and yet they were not home Baptists and that talk about the Baptist church. A home Baptist is a person who said, “Well I believe in Jesus, I’m a Baptist, but I don’t ever want to have to
go to church. I ain’t going to do a thing except my God and I is it.” I don’t know what
that communicates now, but that is not the Church of Christ. We have a sense of
community and that’s to our grace, that’s a grace for us and I love that. But, we still are
very focused on individual piety. We are just now beginning in the Church of Christ as a
religious grouping to look at some of the social issues, who we are, and some of our ultra
idealism…did you know the Church of Christ at all? Do you know much about it?
SM: Very little, very little.
RC: Okay, well in my childhood I was very well aware that many times
preachers would articulate you have to be a member of the Church of Christ or you can’t
be saved. It was as crass as that. Then it wasn’t that crass, but it was implied, and we
knew what we were saying and other people, as people came to understand that they
either could tolerate it or say, “This is not for me.” We have had that reputation and you
won’t have to ask far around here in Lubbock, Texas to find people that’s your
stereotype. One of our largest churches is right over here on Broadway, Broadway
Church of Christ. I don't think it’s that impressive a congregation, but it is probably the
largest church in our brotherhood at one time and that was when I was a student in
Abilene. I was here for the opening service of that building. But, we’ve really moved
beyond some of the very strict definitions have kind of gone by the wayside. My concern
about that is we need still to know why we made the changes, and we need to relate those
to original text that we respect so much and we need to…as we get ready to see if my
present congregation in Dallas how much expression can women have in church. There’s
no limit, I think they ought to be fully equal. But, that ain’t the way it is in my church. It
just isn't there. We’re not as backwards as the Catholics on that issue! We have
something together, and I had very personal friends who left the congregation I think
because we just got a little too loose there and that’s in recent time. So, we’re pretty slow
on that. But I began to be aware at Harvard that that was…social ethical issues were poor
but curious. It was after I left Harvard that they got the Center for Women’s Studies.
They got that off the ground after I left. So, in one sense Harvard might not have been all
that forward-looking and here rather late in the 20th century and the Center for Public
Affairs, Values and Public Life, that’s a center too and now non-Christian studies,
Buddhist studies, those things have all happened in the last 25 years. They’re
magnificent and they’re very pace setting but they’re rather new and liberal. As a nation,
we’ve not been terribly into social ethics up until World War II. But, happily I was there
when the nation was making this move, this current began to move, and the ‘60s before
Vietnam…well, Vietnam in the ‘60s moved us to where we’d have to look at those
things. We must never, never go back.

SM: Well you bring up Buddhism, and I was curious again at Abilene Christian
and at Harvard, did you have comparative religion courses?
RC: At Harvard, yes. At Harvard I had, yes.
SM: The History of Religion?
RC: I did not at Abilene.
SM: Did they talk about Buddhism, Islam, other religions from around the
world?
RC: It came up in the mission emphasis; now not with much solution because we
had a mission to Japan that instituted Eburaki Christian and I think that institution still
exists and is I think respectable. But, as far as what you do in Oriental religions, I think
we were aware in Arab states that persecution was pretty likely or at least you were not
free to express yourself. Of course the main thing in those days, it was communism and
Catholicism. We had a periodical called Voice of Freedom that focused on those things
and without being too hard on the Church of Christ or Protestant Churches in general. In
this book that I mentioned about Sword of Constantine the Pope declared Americanism
heresy at the beginning of the 20th Century. Are you aware of that?
SM: He declared…
RC: Americanism heretical, I mean democracy was really a heresy and if in the
years of my life, beginning of 1929 to 1950 we’ll say, well until the 12th Diet and John III
came over if there was a very clear anti-Catholic statement, it was not without some
justification as far as good democratic Americans are concerned. An unlikely thing in
retrospect, but maybe not so much so as beacon press which is the military universalists
published American freedom and catholic power in 1952 and that was the text that I
studied in Abilene, and man alive, we’ve got a Catholic president and he’s going to turn
us over to the Pope! You know, reading [?]? And this is Unitarians, this is not the
Church of Christ says you’re going to hell if you’re not a member of the church. This is
Unitarians and they sent that in and there were two or three books about [?]. A blessing for the world was John the 23rd. In fact, James Carol who built Vatican III on Vatican II and we have certainly as a world been blessed by what began with John the 23rd and in Abilene we were very much aware of the Catholics, Catholicism as Catholicism. We were a little gentler with the protestant churches, but we really knew who we were and we were very clear about that and that is because of this focus on personal piety, the perfectionist theology and I think psychology. We had some people who had real problems psychologically because they didn’t know quite what to do with that kind of rigid theology. I mean, people going through depression because they couldn’t square it away. But, the spiritual tenor of the nation and of our churches has moved significantly in the last 50 years and I think happily.

SM: I would imagine that at Harvard you didn’t find too much anti-papism, anti-Catholicism?

RC: No, no, no! That was why I was going to lose my faith because they would liberalize us!

SM: Turn you into a papist!

RC: No, but it was still tough to be at Harvard. If I had it to do over again, I wouldn’t do it. I’d be free instead of so tied down because I was still pretty tied down for most of the time I was at Harvard. It didn’t keep me from getting a great, great blessing that came to me.

SM: How much anti-Communism was emphasized at Abilene and Harvard, because, of course, to Godless Communism…

RC: Now, I can say something about Harvard there.

SM: How about Abilene?

RC: At Abilene it was kind of a remote issue as I recall. But, at Harvard, if you were matriculated there you were a communist. Did you know that?

SM: Oh, the mentality?

RC: If you were a student there, consequently I made it very, very careful, I was very careful not to tell people that I was a Harvard man at the time. I never made a big deal of that because it seemed…it may sound pretentious, and I only dropped that when I think people need to kind of be put into perspective! But, I say only…I don’t mind this
being known, its just that I feel if I can keep that and let that work within me, that I’m freer with people who haven’t had such an advantage or opportunity like high school drop outs, and I deal with a whole bunch of those. I go on and impress them with my degrees. But Harvard, this was the height of McCarthy era and the black listing of people by McCarthy. What was the text that I enjoyed so much by Theodore White, *In Search of History*?

SM: Yes.

RC: I loved that book, but he was one of the bad boys. He was one of the Camelot people. So, I really felt that very keenly in a personal way; never did anybody really target me that way but I was fully aware because after all, I was just fresh in being…I had this very dire sendoff that I was going…so then not only was I not going to be a Christian anymore, but I was going to be a communist! Those things didn’t come true but this onus was terrible for a young man who was having a tough time trying to sort all this stuff out. Nowadays I think, “Well, it wasn’t so bad. I came off it with rather a few battle scars.” A lot of this was in my mind and the bigger energy, as I said with the marriage was so dysfunctional. So, I have two adopted sons who are adults. Neither one is active in the faith at all. If I have a prayer it is that they will find a way to express that side of themselves in a genuine way. I see movement in my sons, 36 and 37 and 40. But, that’s been another part of my spiritual pilgrimage and the separation tours only emphasized the weakness in our relationship. I was in Korea in ’64 and ’65 and Vietnam ’70-’71 and those separations, they just said things are really in pretty bad shape here. But, that wasn’t what either she nor I wanted was divorce but we didn’t have the spiritual resources between us for the marriage to survive. But, I’m okay with that. I have such a rich, wonderful life and my Vietnam veteran experience is such a major part of that that I really wish she could share this with me. When I see Mrs. Zumwalt, I think how different it would have been if we could have walked together. But, I know a lot of people whose marriages are tested in the military experience. One of the most horrifying things for me and least to be expected was the domestic collapse in the Gulf War. It was six months at the most and sometimes seven or eight weeks. People’s marriages just collapse all over the place. It was an awful war. But, we really don’t do very well with some of those things in lots of cases. Now, I will say this about the military, though, and
it’s to its credit and the corporate world has never discovered this; the Army takes care of
its own and there is a sense of community and families are honored in the military. The
corporate world, they want someone to go off and move someplace else, forget about the
fact that his family, the kids going to school and wife comfortable in whatever social life
she had. It’s a terrible thing, and the corporate world just pays no attention and seems to
have very little concern about this. Now of course I’m sure there are exceptions, but the
military has never been that negligent of its families and I think that that probably comes
from some of the spirit of Lincoln who said, “Take care of one who are born in the heat
of battle, his widow and his orphan.” So, there are some resources, some spiritual
resources that we have from our history that bode well.

SM: One last quick question; again at either Abilene or Harvard in any of the
courses that you took, was there much discussion about – and again, this is the height of
the Cold War. This is the height of the Cold War in terms of things are really getting hot
between the United States and the Soviet Union, all this spying that the Soviets did
during the Second World War with the atomic bomb, that’s all come out, and the iron
curtain is down and there’s all kinds of nasty things going on in Eastern Europe and
Hungary and other places, so there’s just a lot of tension between the two super powers.
Was there a lot of discussion in terms of reinforcement that yes, communism is evil.
Communism is bad. Was that emphasized at all at either institution, either Abilene or
Harvard, and again because of the apparent Godlessness of Communism?

RC: I graduated from Abilene in ’48 and so that was the period before…no, not
’48, ’52, and I graduated Harvard in ’55 and McCarthy preceded what phenomenon
you’re describing. You’re describing more of a ‘60s and while I’ve kind of kept up with
what was going on at Harvard a little bit, but mostly since I got off active duty because I
was on active duty until 1972 and I felt kind of out of the loop about a lot of things. I
didn’t know much about Vietnam until I got there. In fact, as I say, I didn't know much
about that until 1990 for my own personal reasons that I referred to. 1955 we still were
respecting the George Keenan fear of the Domino Theory. So we were pretty well
agreed. The thought that comes to me and was in my mind when I asked the history
question this morning is that if we had done right or if we had been opened to Ho Chi
Minh, the Vietnam War may never have even happened and the Domino Theory may
never have threatened. But, the Domino Theory was so strong and you heard it
mentioned even this morning, or I did, that we really couldn't extract ourselves and see
that maybe there were other factors out there. I think Red China is not the same as the
Soviet Union; it never was. But, I don’t think Americans could see that and in academia
I don’t think we were helped much either. Now this is a question for you; do you think
that the Center here, the Vietnam Center, is going to help people look ahead and see
bigger lights? Let's just say that’s what I pray. That’s my prayer, and I want that for
every educational institution. I want that for everybody who reads a book or goes to an
institute, I want them to get reflective and not to take the canned answers, the going
thing, because life is just too full, too rich, too complex, and the simple answers aren’t
going to serve us very well in the heaven. But, I would think that in this mix, there just
may be a real opportunity for a forward look.

SM: I hope so.

RC: I think Vietnam is the subject that could help us to do that.

SM: Thank you very much. This will end the interview with Mr. Russel J.

Carver.

SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Chaplain Russel Carver
on the 21st of May, 2001 at approximately 9:10 Lubbock time. I am in Lubbock, Texas
and Chaplain Carver is in Dallas, Texas. Sir, why don’t we go ahead and pick up with a
discussion of what you did when you finished going through Harvard Divinity School?

RC: Okay. Let's see, that would be 1955. The first thing is that I was married
the last year that I was there. I married in 1954. The first thing I did was stayed in New
England for ten years. I worked at a home heating oil company for a while just to have
something to make a little bit of money. But, that was not particularly eventful. I was in
Nadek, Massachusetts. Then in ’57 we began a home mission church in Littleton,
Massachusetts and I was with that church until 1962 at which time I was commissioned
into the service as a chaplain. What kind of thing would you like me to tell about those
years just before going in the service?

SM: Just explain briefly what your positions entailed, what activities were
included in those positions, what you gained from that that you were able to apply later in
your military career?
RC: I think one of the main things that I gained was to become adjusted to a community that was quite different from what I had always known in Texas. New England is not like a foreign country exactly, yet it has its own personality. Finally becoming acquainted with that way of life, that was...it took some doing. For one thing, it was the time when I was becoming and sensing that I was fully independent. I was no longer in school, I was no longer dependent on parents and scholarships and one thing or another. Becoming independent as an adult was really a major event and I think probably in everybody’s life but certainly it was in my life. That coincided with becoming adjusted to a community and with somewhat different culture. Maybe I should say that a mission church, a home mission church. I say that because Churches of Christ are even to this day not very widespread or very large in the New England area. But, my feeling about that was that when I really got...my feeling about that was that once I had really made that kind of transition I could find myself at home any place in the world and be comfortable with that. I don't know whether that is because I just had made peace with adulthood or a new community. I don’t know. Somehow I feel like that if I had always lived in Texas, there would have been a dimension of my life that I would not have ever achieved. I think that living in that place and becoming at home elsewhere than where I began was a major, major area of growth for me as far as the church work was concerned. The little church never grew very big. We built a little building while I was there. We never had more than 50 or 60 members. But, some of those people are still very, very close friends. I always loved to go to New England and see those people even today and if they’re elsewhere, and many of them are other places, these are very, very close friends because of what we did and shared in that ministry and in that church experience.

SM: Just out of curiosity, what did you find most – well, for lack of a better way of putting it – foreign about New England based on your life?

RC: What did I find most...

SM: Foreign.

RC: Foreign?

SM: Yeah, different or strange or whatever?

RC: I think that...how do I put this? The rather casual way of living that I remember in Texas was not there. It seemed like that there was a certain intensity and
almost a bruskness of people expressed there. That was easy to interpret as a person’s being unfriendly or cold. But when I really broke through that sound barrier I found people very fine and wonderful, but there’s not always very much of a... The initial warmth was something I missed that I had known all my life in the Texas area.

SM: What led you to decide to enter the service?

RC: Well I never was able to make much money to support my family in that ministry situation. There was a man who had been a military chaplain who came to do a series of special services at our church who talked with me and made a recommendation that I apply for a commission and I did. So, that was how it was and I really felt very good about the military. However, do we want to talk about the military at this point?

SM: Well I’m curious about your wife’s response to that.

RC: To New England?

SM: Well, to your interest in the military.

RC: I think that my wife...this is a personal statement, and since it’s about her I’ll try to make it general so it wouldn’t be embarrassing to her. Ministry was not a work that she enjoyed being a part of. She was there, but she would have preferred that her life not be as much involved in my life and profession as ministry requires wives to be and I suspect that in the longer picture that’s why our marriage...part of the reason why our marriage didn’t succeed. But, she went with me and we went into the military and we had some fine experiences about where we lived. Our older son we adopted when we were...well, that would be in 1960 and he was an infant, just a little seven days old. His name is Ray and we adopted him and then went in the service. When I was in basic, chaplain basic course my wife and my son lived with her parents in Dallas and then when I got my first assignment which was at Fort Dix, a military police unit, then she and Ray joined me and we lived in military housing.

SM: Let’s talk about the chaplain’s basic course real quick. Where was that?

RC: It was at a little post called Fort Slokum and it was on an island off New Rochelle and you rode a ferry to and from, and that was about a nine-week experience there.

SM: What did that involve?
RC: The courses? Mainly they taught us about common subjects which is what it was to be an officer in the military and then there was technical subjects, chaplain subjects about the nature of our specific responsibilities as chaplain were. That was very helpful. You’re always obliged in a chaplain career to have the basic course and then the advanced course. The advanced course took place somewhere mid-career. For me that would have happened in 1971 and ’72 so it would be ten years into my career. But, the basic course simply prepared us for our duty and assignments as a new chaplain.

SM: Well I’m curious; based on the basic course instructions received, what was the biggest difference between being military chaplain and being just a regular minister in the church?

RC: Well I’m going to tell you; this is something I’ve thought about a lot. Somehow, and this wouldn’t be literally so, but somehow I felt like that maybe I could turn the Army into my church, which in the Churches of Christ we were very congregational so the minister is pretty central to the activities. Well I was in the Army. I told people I was in the Army a year before I joined, and what that means is that at that point I really realized that I was always to be a staff officer. I was never to be…the central figure would be the commander and I would always be the advisor to the commander on morals, religion, and morale. That’s a part of the way it’s defined in the Army regulations. But forth, three spaces in all the Army chaplains…you’re always a staff person, only three slots that are command positions for chaplains; one as the chief, one as the commandant of the chaplain’s school, and the one that I was at. You were always staff and learning to be a staff person rather than center of command was a real lesson for me to learn, but once learned it made my military career much more comfortable. But, that took some doing. Churches that are organized more hierarchically, I think those ministers never had that kind of adjustment to the military that I found a big hurdle.

SM: What month and year did you enter active duty?

RC: That would be in July of 1962.

SM: A couple of significant events had occurred from the time that you finished Harvard and entered the military on active service, things like the launching of Sputnik, Cuban Missile Crisis...well, Cuban Missile Crisis not yet, the Bay of Pigs, the Bay of...
Pigs Invasion, the election of John F. Kennedy. Were these events big concerns to you, major concerns?

RC: Oh yes, because on my first assignment we were actually alerted and sent to Old Miss to help integrate James Meredith there. We were a military police unit and that lasted a whole year. I didn’t stay down there the whole time, nor did our whole battalion stay there, but contentions stayed there through the whole year and I was there, oh, three or four weeks and then I came back to Fort Dix and then one other time I made a trip down there for a few days to be with the troops that were assigned there at that time. That was one thing. It was in that same period that the Cuban Missile Crisis occurred. I know I’m getting ahead of myself. ’62?

SM: Yes, it was October ’62.

RC: Yeah. See, we were already on this mission in Oxford, Mississippi there. But, I’m trying to think. There was lots of concern that many military units would be mobilized and where would we be in the middle of that? Probably had there been a mobilization, our mission there at Old Miss would have continued because a certainly not everyone would have gone. I guess that my awareness of the racial climate in the nation was very heightened and intensified by this experience at Old Miss. While I think that we’ve made great strides in the nation, I think we’ve still got a long way to go in racial integration. It was a pleasant thing and a bit unusual for me to live in an integrated environment because the military has been in the lead of integration and I was always glad to be a part of that because I felt like there was some...I could live with a certain degree of freedom with people of all races that I hadn’t experienced earlier and it wasn’t as noticeable in New England because there were fewer black people there, but at the same time I think that the military is ahead of our whole culture and has been all along. I presently work at the VA and here in Dallas we do...in fact, when I leave this morning I’m going to participate in the Asian American activity with an invocation. The VA makes a big deal about Asian Americans and blacks and women, all the ethnic groups that we have, we celebrate that. So, the VA is kind of at an extension and its integration is kind of an extension of what I knew and enjoyed in the military and I think that’s a good model for the entire community and society.
SM: And in terms of your initial impressions of the military community, your
first duty assignment, how did you...were you surprised at all by the nature of the climate
of the unit in terms of either religiosity or spirituality? Did you find that the military
wasn’t particularly a religious institution or not?

RC: There’s some very interesting impressions that I got and still have. I had a
chaplain friend at Fort Dix and I enjoyed being with him a lot, a nice guy named Earl
Hutchison and he was a hospital chaplain but he said one time, says, “The Army needs
chaplains except on Sunday.” What that translates out to be is that the soldiers, when
they come on active duty, are rather obliged in the first few weeks of military experience
at basic to fill up the chapel and they come. All of them get marks to that or whether they
do that so much anymore, but the early weeks that’s the thing that the chapels are full to
running over. As soon as basic is over, they rather decline in those very large numbers so
that in the chapels the participation goes way down and the service people who are
without families, rather a few of them participate in the chapel. Now, there are chapels
on the bases both here in the United States and overseas where families are involved and
those chapels are much more nearly like churches, church congregations. But, you’re not
always associated with one of those things. In a minute I want to talk about the
difference between area coverage and unit assignment, but I can wait on that for a
moment. The thing that I noticed is that let’s say that someone...there’d be a crisis,
maybe a unit member would lose his life in an accident or something. It could be a
memorial service and all of a sudden the chapel would be completely full. The sense of
camaraderie will bring people to a faith expression in a crisis like when you’re in a war
zone, and my unit was not exposed to much combat when I was in Vietnam but when
those memorial services happened, everybody came. For all of the moral varnish that
might be off, our appearance of morality, there is a very deep faith and spirituality in
service people that shows itself in times of crisis. That’s just memorial services. As far
as the varnish is concerned, the reputation of the service people being hard drinking and
carousing, that reputation is not without some kind of reason. On the other hand, that
doesn't mean that everybody there is derelict or things like that. It just means that people
don’t feel like they have to put on a front. In the military there’s a certain freedom to be
who they are, and what they want to be. The chapel for non-Catholic chaplains is pretty
much a general expression as far as ecumenicity is concerned, I think a lot of people that
I have known, even in the military and aid chapel, like it because it does not have those
denominational definitions that are in place in churches. A lot of people like the military
chapel. We had a couple in our service yesterday who come from time to time, elderly
couple, and I think that they come because it just feels good to be in that climate where
you don’t have to define yourself by a doctrine or that kind of thing. Also, in the military
chapel the funding is done through appropriations, public tax appropriations, so the
emphasis on raising money to build buildings or do church programs is not anywhere
near as strong because you don't have to do that. But, that doesn’t mean that there’s not a
chaplain’s fund. There is, and those things are administered with care in the chapel
programs, but raising money is not the big deal in a military chapel like it can be in some
churches. Now where am I in the questions?

SM: I’m curious; you mentioned you wanted to also discuss the differences
between I guess unit assignment and area coverage?

RC: Yes. That has to do with your rating. I did not...this is a matter that was
not...from the very time that I entered the service, I never got it quite clear. In fact, I
think it was only after I was in a reduction force that I began to really clarify that your as
I say unit responsibility to your commander, to your rater, and rater and then the
endorser, I feel like that as long as I could do quasi-church kind of things, which is what
area coverage, that would be to families and the community life, that that should cover
me. Well, as it happened that worked against me for not knowing that more clearly. I
have heard many chaplains over the years saying that if they got bad efficiency reports or
if they got rated down, it would be because they might have attended to community
responsibility more than to the unit assignment or to the commanders they were assigned
to. Yet it wasn’t that you had permission to neglect your community responsibility, your
area coverage as I said, because chaplains were put in that position to make a choice. We
had to be on call for any crisis that might occur in or on the post where our unit might be
assigned. If there was a chapel program that was not linked directly to our unit, we were
obliged to participate in that, too. It was an easy area which I would say confusion
indeed. Part of my being in the reduction in force was because I did not make that
distinction and I did get rated in a negative fashion on my unit responsibility later in my career.

SM: What was your relationship like in your first unit of assignment, your first duty station, with your immediate commander. That would be I guess a battalion commander?

RC: Yes, military police battalion. That was a really good experience. I found it very helpful to be on a staff meeting and on a commander’s staff. It was in such a setting that I began to understand the difference between staff responsibility and the command sense of ministering a local church has. I began to see what the regulation was about advising the commander, [?] morals and morale was about. Having lived in that environment that continues even to this present time, I know where I am in the VA and I know where I’m not and it was a very helpful thing to learn to be a staff chaplain in that military community. First what I did, I would make myself present in the work situations with the military police. We had one program in those days which was discontinued I think because people didn’t think the chaplains ought to be doing this kind of thing. It’s called character guidance and on a three year monthly cycle we had topics that we would discuss; family, patriotism, honesty, certain moral responsibility and moral topics that we would...and I rather enjoyed doing that because it was a way I could talk about life in a community that dealt with our cultural values that were not what I would do in a sermon. Some of the chaplains did not like that because they didn’t have. It was not appropriate to use it as a church pulpit shall we say, but I rather enjoyed that and it enriched my life to look into the history of our values in America and how they fit in the military and purpose for military life and all that kind of thing, and I really enjoyed it. That program was weakened and then finally eliminated all together because I think that maybe the program was misused and it was confused on the issue of separation of church and state was I think lurking in the minds of people who thought that that probably had to go as a program for all chaplains to do.

SM: Well in terms of character development, were there other mechanisms or means at your disposal to try to promote ethics and morality in the workplace and in the military in general?
RC: It became for me at least more a matter of finding soldiers who needed counseling. Maybe they would get an Article 15 or find themselves with a court marshal or there’d be family difficulties that would be brought to the chapel’s attention. So early on I came to practice counseling on an individual or family basis. The chaplains had the same recurring meetings perhaps once a month at which some of these scenes that we dealt with in our counseling program would be discussed and that sort of thing. One of the things that I began to realize is that the chaplain versus the military psychiatrist or military helping services, I had always thought that anyone who would present himself for counseling with a professional that his or her recovery to a more normal way of doing things, more successful way of living was the goal and I felt like the chaplains were generalists and were less equipped to help people to really cope with their life issues, though we certainly were there. But, I think it was in my second assignment when I was in Korea that I visited with a psychiatric social worker and he told me that psychiatry practiced in the military was what he would call social psychiatry and he defined that as saying that a service person would be evaluated and he was not distressed enough or disturbed enough to interfere with his functioning, that that was a part of what the psychiatrist was doing, and if he couldn’t function then he would get an appropriate discharge. I became aware from that conversation forward that the chaplain did a great deal to maintain people and to help them to overcome with whatever tools we had which, as I said, I was then and feel even now still something of a generalist. So, my understanding of how to help people to cope and change and grow are much clearer these days then it was back then but the chaplain had a very big responsibility to help people continue with some degree of success in the military. We were a bigger presence I think numerically than psychiatrists or the other helping services. So, I felt that responsibility very keenly to help people cope and to grow.

SM: Well that’s interesting from a psychiatrist perspective than it was that they weren't there to help cure people, they were primarily to evaluate?

RC: That was a real shock to me to hear that. If an officer were married to a woman who had psychiatric problems that he was a key person, or even the officer himself, if they had an alcoholic problem a great deal of energy might be put into him by the psychiatrist to see if he could assist him to cope with that problem and continue in his
career. I don’t necessarily disapprove of that because just like the Army’s not the church, neither is it a mental health clinic. So, getting the mission central and then the staff support contributing to the accomplishment of the mission, as that came clearer through my military career it helped me to understand not only chaplains but other staff responsibilities such as psychiatrist or the legal services. It’s not a place where you could go and get all your legal business taken care of. There was legal support. Wills were assisted to be prepared and of course the JAG, which were the lawyers, those people were very helpful we’ll say in times of court marshal and that kind of thing and chaplains in the law, the JAG officers were often times working together with the same client.

SM: Well I’m curious about the officer issues and also comparing officers to enlisted, did you see any differences in terms of religious observance in your first duty assignment and then in subsequent duty stations?

RC: No, that was in the difference between the officers and the enlisted men in their faith experience?

SM: Well yeah, their faith experience and also in terms of the consistency of attendance, things like that, of religious services?

RC: Let me come at that. Officers more regularly than enlisted had families and so they felt some constraint to belong to the chapel program. This wasn’t always the case but officers with their families would many times become kind of the responsible core of the military congregation. Enlisted people, it depended to a great extent on their upbringing and if they felt good about the faith practice those would continue active in the chapel program but a lot of times, and this I think is true of that age of a young person, moving toward independence found people wanting to kind of emancipate themselves from things that they associated with, dependency and you see the beginning of that when people are late teenage. They will move away from church connections because that kind of dependency that they like to overcome and I think that that same sort of thing is going on in the military because enlisted people were not necessarily all that much older than high school dropouts or high school graduates and people entering college. So, those would be very similar. But, officers of course would be maybe five to 20 years older than enlisted people in most units. Did I address the question that you asked?
SM: Yeah, I think so. I guess the answer is yes, there was a difference to a degree and it resulted from a number of different factors.

RC: Let me go ahead and say something about the chaplain as an officer. We had a lot more freedom to move between officer and enlisted people. We could move among the enlisted people. The military does not want its officers fraternizing with enlisted people and that’s made very explicit. The chaplain is a kind of exception to that. That doesn't mean that we didn’t still need to know that an officer was at a different level in the military but we had the freedom to move about and be somewhat less rank conscious. The chaplains though who did well and who continued to be promoted were the ones who enhanced their career by going to the regular Army instead of staying in the reserve, which I was always a reserve officer. But, they would go regular Army and they paid a lot more attention to the unit responsibility than I said in my own case. To see military ministers paying a personal attention for their own career development, maybe even instead of attending to spiritual needs of people in the military, was something that the chaplains often talked about and we kind of knew the ones who were to stay on and to get choice assignments and that kind of thing because they paid attention to their career development patterns. On the other hand, this is not to say that even successful military chaplains were always opportunists, better officers than chaplains. We had one chief of chaplains, and I don't choose to recall his name because this is a judgment and I don’t think he ever said this exactly, but the normal tour for a chief of chaplain would be four years, but his tour only lasted three years and his being finished with his career seemed to coincide with or follow pretty soon after he made public statement against a use of nuclear weaponry in a seminary presentation that he made. So, there were limits. I was very aware of the Hatch Act which says that you don’t go into the military pulpit and the chapel pulpit and take a political position or a partisan position and I can almost remember the times on my thumbs when I edged up to that. In fact, it was in the VA that I made such a statement. Of course the congregation may have been 15 or 20 people. I don’t suppose anybody paid any attention to the fact that I did say it, but I did say I opposed going into the Gulf War because I don’t want to see another generation of service people trashed out emotionally and psychologically like I had seen in the Vietnam experience. If I can jump ahead, maybe I said this in the earlier part of the interview, my
ministry has come to special focus over major stress, combat stress, PTSD, every time. Almost every day that I go to the VA I’m looking for psychic trauma and that is no longer limited to combat trauma. It is any kind of traumatic experience that could leave one struggling with the symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. That focus in my ministry, if I didn’t say before, happened in 1990 when I joined the National Conference of Vietnam Veteran Ministers. I heard for the first time what combat really was from colleagues who were not chaplains necessarily on active duty during Vietnam but were infantry or medics or door gunners or what have you. Many of the members of our conference have struggled with the symptoms or the coping mechanisms that we associate with PTSD and even...this is very present because one of my latest experiences that I’ve enjoyed is six sessions in which we reviewed Homer’s *Iliad* and just last night I began reading Jonathon Shay’s book *Achilles In Vietnam* which I’ve known about that book all along. He has addressed our Vietnam Veteran Ministers Conference on two or three different occasions. It has been very helpful to my ministry to have an enrichment of what major trauma can do to a person’s spirit and moral sense. So, that’s one of the things that has gradually grown in me is that sense of who I want to be in ministry and that all started from the very beginning. I wouldn’t think that I’d ever be first an officer and second a chaplain because my ministry’s come to be so very, very important and I still love being in this ministry.

SM: Yes, sir. Well I’m curious, and again I realize you don’t want to [?] but can you tell me at least what the position of the Chief of Chaplain’s was concerning nuclear weapons?

RC: Oh he was opposed to it. I think he may have published in the general area. It was at the time when nuclear warfare was the big talk and position for a sane society or whatever that effort was, that initiative was. That was in air and he felt that he needed to make a statement. He felt that that was an inappropriate way for the nation to proceed.

SM: Of course that was a very big issue about the 1950s, ‘60s, ‘70s.

RC: Right.

SM: Ministerial circles throughout the world really, not just in the US.

RC: And still is.
SM: Yes, and still is. Well I’m curious, this brings up a very interesting issue and that is of course that potential conflict that exists for all chaplains in that obviously there has to be a decision made in terms of who does one serve, God or Man? How does a chaplain deal with that, because obviously if the need or the feeling is strong enough, as it was for the Chief of Chaplains, that this is an issue that must be talked about and as a chaplain I must make this particular position known, that is a very difficult situation?

RC: I think it’s somewhat in the same category as pacifism. When I was in...I may have mentioned this earlier. You can’t divorce yourself from a certain climate. It’s because of that that I have chosen not to be a pacifist. I’m a veteran for peace and I don’t want...I think we ought to use diplomacy much, much more creatively than we have so that we can preclude international conflict. I think that we need to belong to the United Nations and help in those peacekeeping efforts, wherever that be the case. But, when the conflict escalates beyond the best that we humans have claimed to be, I don’t think that one can be divorced from that. As far as the nuclear issue is concerned, I will tell you that the most vivid training that I ever got was when we dealt with an acronym called MOPP gear, that was Military Oriented Protected Posture. That was a covering uniform that we were obliged to use and practice in which you put on over your regular uniform to protect yourself from nuclear exposure. I was having trouble getting it on when we were doing this training so I sat down and finished getting all this stuff put on on top of my uniform. The trainer indicated to me afterwards that I had contaminated myself by sitting my butt on the ground. It just was such a real kind of thing to be in a nuclear war environment where it was almost no way to protect yourself or protect the environment. I thought, “This is just terrible.” From that training experience and then little things I knew about nuclear war, I thought, “I don’t know how people can be very casual and blasé in talking about a first strike or a nuclear warfare and that kind of thing, and that was when I was in Command and General Staff College. That was taught rather freely and I think that in some circles it still is taught. This is one of the options as far as the weaponry arsenal, and I think that’s a really...I just think that the planet can’t tolerate what we could do to it, and us individuals in it just really would be negligible and I certainly hope for all the initiatives that are taken to put limits on nuclear war. But again,
if I were in the environment, I would not feel that I could be not involved. I’d have to do
the best I could, but that goes back to why I’m not a pacifist.

SM: Well in terms of the training you received, early on in basic chaplainry and
later on in perhaps the advanced course or other professional development, how were
chaplains instructed to counsel on issues like the fact that a military exists primarily for
one reason and that is of course to kill the enemy that is threatening us. At the same time,
most of the soldiers who make up our military come from Christian backgrounds, and of
course the principal tenet of Christianity is peace and love. Were you given any
instruction on how to address those types of contradictions and current contradictions
between the essential institution of the military itself and the teachings of religion?

RC: What I’ve said about my own way of coping with that personally certainly
colored the way I would talk to the soldiers and that kind of thing. Occasionally we
would find people who would find themselves convicted in such a way that they would
want to be either discharged from the service or to take a non-combatant MOS and
chaplains were often in that counseling process and there were people who actually did
get a discharge on the basis of conscientious objection, but the larger majority of people
who came to this position would be transferred to non-combatant units or assignments,
military occupational specialties. To me, that didn’t solve the problem but it gave them a
temporary respite from the combat MOS that confronted them so directly with the
military mission. We talked about that in our professional development class and we
knew that we were going to deal with these kinds of things. But, the Army continued to
be the Army. It didn’t become my church, so the military mission continued to obtain.
That was all of this process was why I’ve become in my heart a veteran for peace, and
there is an organization by that name. I’m not a member of that. But, as far as wanting
to take all those initiatives and politically that can preclude war, I’m very strongly in
favor of all those things and to strengthen them. I think our presidents, for example, find
to take all those initiatives and politically that can preclude war, I’m very strongly in
favor of all those things and to strengthen them. I think our presidents, for example, find
themselves tempted to bypass those initiatives because it seems the quicker way to cope
with the problem to take military action. I think the presidency is ill advised to go into
those things. This is not a partisan issue. I see almost all of our presidents being pressed
to make a military decision and I think that they need to be much more creative and more
deliberate, because one of these days we might not be the number one power in the world
and it might look considerably different if the balance of power is shifted against the
United States.

SM: I forgot to ask you, when we were talking about the issue of the differences
between perhaps the officer and enlisted religious observance, did you notice any
difference between your first duty assignment and Korea, where of course men would
typically be on unaccompanied tours, would they not?

RC: Oh yeah. That does need to be mentioned. Like I said, if I hadn’t
discovered the grace of God in Korea I would have lost not only my faith but my mind!
Consorting with the women that were available to be consorted with, there’s a full six to
one available and it was the way that these people had to survive, at least that’s the way
they saw it in Korea. I hope it’s not quite that way these days because the Korean
economy has certainly improved since normalization of trade relations with Japan, which
happened the year I was there in 1955. But, the people that had the most difficulty, most
noticeable difficulty were family people who didn’t come with the strongest moral sense.
I remember doing an orientation while I was in Korea of new personnel and I would say,
“If you think there's nothing wrong with extra-marital sex, what percentage do you think
will engage in extra-marital activities, if you don’t have any personal restrictions?”
They’d say, “Well 100%.” I’d say, “What about the ones who do feel that you should
limit sex to marriage?” There’d be a big percentage of those that would yield to the
opportunity. But, the conclusion is that without some sense of limiting one’s sexual
activity to marriage, there just wasn’t much chance at all. But, the ones that I thought had
the hardest time were the ones that really had to leave a marriage behind and they had a
tough time. Our single service people might experiment a little bit, but their choices were
much, much easier for them it seems than the ones who were struggling with wife and
family that they didn’t have with them. That was very noticeable, and the domestic
tragedies that followed in that wake were just awful. When you came back to the United
States you saw the domestic debris and the families were in a lot of deterioration.
Officers didn’t seem to be quite as much a part of that scene as the non-commissioned
officers, but it was a big deal to be on a separation tour. I think the time I saw this with
the most intensity was during the Gulf War. I was a part of something here in the VA
where we kind of paid attention to families and the things that I read about what
happened in those three or four months, the huge number of divorces that happened in that very limited test to families. It just seemed like this huge upsurge and made me realize that maybe our family relationships are a lot more tenuous than I’d ever supposed they might have been. The Gulf War really shocked me because of what happened there. That was talked a great deal in the Gulf War experience, and that was a part of...I forgot how I got involved in that, but there was a weekly meeting at one of the churches where families of Gulf War service persons, those families would get together and would talk about those kinds of things. In that conversation and the reading that I did and the things that I heard I realized there’s a great deal of distress that came in such a short period that really worked against families and against marriage.

SM: This will end the interview with Chaplain Russel Carver on May 22nd.
SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Chaplain Russel Carver on the 23rd of May, 2001 at 9:45 Lubbock time. I’m in Lubbock, Texas and Chaplain Carver is in Dallas, Texas. Sir, I’d like to begin today’s discussion with an evaluation, your evaluation, of some of the training you received in the basic course, the advanced course, and in other professional development that you had throughout your military career concerning grief counseling and death counseling, and if you would begin with the discussion of the earliest training you received and how to deal with those very sensitive issues as a chaplain in the military?

RC: Basic course, and this is a bit vague because I don’t have any notes in front of me, but basic course was as you might expect broad and general and a lot of things that were related to the military were going to be...just were put out there to us in such a way that we could kind of get a beginning. It was like any orientation to a brand new experience but at the same time they were pointed to what chaplainry would be about. One thing I remember and I’ll mention this, it was in 1962 and at that point there were only men in the chaplainry certainly and women presence in the military was pretty limited. But, it was said to us that the nearest thing that the Army has to a mother is the chaplain. Some years later when I was at the University of North Texas for a counseling course, they gave us a test on masculine and feminine characteristics and curiously I came out stronger on feminine. There had been a time in my life when I would have probably been devastated by that information, but in reflecting on the kind of caring
sense that I’ve developed and feel comfortable with, I was rather amused at that and
thought that’s well cast because that’s what they told me when I was in basic course. I
don’t know that I’ve ever heard any other chaplain reflect on that particular item, but a
book that has been very helpful to me to incorporate that sense that I think is so important
to a chaplain in grief counseling and in death counseling is a book called *Caring: A*
*Feminine Approach to Ethics* or some subtitle by a woman named Nell Noddings. She
said that the masculine approach to ethics is through principals and rules, with exceptions
there, too. But, that the feminine approach is through caring and a focus on specific
relationships. I found that very fascinating. I’ve had courses in ethics and have read
some areas in ethics, but that distinction really was very personal to me and it’s
interesting that while I read Nell Noddings many years later that it reinforced and
interpreted for my purposes what that statement was there in the basic course and
chaplain school. Now that’s pretty specific and pretty focused. Is there some other way
you can ask the question so that I can be more inclusive in what I respond?

SM: Absolutely. I’m curious; there’s been some significant changes in American
culture over the course of the 20th Century. One of the important ones I think is that
Americans have become increasingly distanced from dealing with death on a very
personal level in the respect that undertakers now, funeral directors deal with the dead
body. Very rarely do Americans, and especially now in the later 20th Century, its very
rare for an American to see a dead body unless it’s a very close family member, and that
wasn’t always the case. I was curious in terms of helping people deal with death, cope
with death, if you noticed from the beginning of your military career in the basic course
to say the present, have you witnessed any differences or changes in the approach the
military had taken and in particular the chaplainry has taken towards helping people cope
with death? Was there, when you first entered, a sense that yes, you have to counsel
people, you have to help them cope with these issues and had that gotten stronger over
time, the push for the counseling aspect?

RC: Let me say that personally I was pretty uncomfortable with death and being
with people who had experienced death. I remember when I was stationed in Germany,
and this would be in 1967 to ’70 that our operations officer was somebody that I was
reasonably close to and his father died, and I was satisfied to be just rather casual about
that; not that I was, but I didn’t go to the guy personally. I didn’t know how to say man
to man what words of comfort, and it was at that point that I realized because I was really
disturbed that I didn’t respond more appropriately, and it was from that point forward that
I never forgot that, how I was not prepared by previous experience to do that. It was my
post-military experience in clinical pastor education, which was the first thing that I did
educationally of importance after I got off active duty, that would be in 1972 to ’74. I
was at Parkland Hospital. Parkland was the hospital where John Kennedy was taken after
he was shot. The chaplain program there included CPE as we refer to it, Clinical Pastor
Education, and it was in that experience that I began to be much more comfortable with
being with people at a time of death and in the circumstance of death because that’s very
much what our ministry was and our training there in CPE. But, quite frankly, both basic
course and career course did not help significantly and my almost non-response to Major
Kelly’s father’s death really was brought into focus and I was extremely relieved to find
learning ministry by doing ministry and this program. So, I guess to make a single
statement is that for death and grief there was really not enough taught. It may have been
more of an academic statement that was made to us as students in those courses and not
enough hands on kind of educative experience. It had to wait until I did CPE before I
really got...and now that is very much what I do and I feel very prepared to do that kind
of thing.

SM: Were there any other things or any other aspects of your service as a
chaplain that you think might have been helped with additional or more thorough
training?

RC: I mentioned to you about this idea of social psychiatry when I was stationed
in Korea. That was my second assignment in 1964 and ’65. The guy’s name was Bob
Hyatt. He happened to be from Amarillo and I knew the Hyatt family casually. But, he
was a psychiatric social worker and when he said that I said, “Oh, well then we chaplains
have to do a lot of things for maintenance of people’s well being, either individually or
according to whatever group we may be associated with, unit, or family.” Once again, I
felt like that chaplains were rather left unacknowledged for the tasks that became ours,
but didn’t seem like that the military recognized this huge responsibility that could fall to
chaplains if perhaps by some default. Once again, I felt like without that
acknowledgement there was not adequate training to say, “You’re standing in the breach. You’re going to fill up a void,” or you have the opportunity to do so. It was rather assumed that we might, but the fact that chaplainry, as the case with a lot of ministry, is politically we are less acknowledged, less supported because the military mission is to do battle and engage the enemy, all that kind of thing. The poetic interpretation of what war and life and death and grief are about is kind of like the funding in academia. The business courses and the courses that helped make money or where people can make money are the ones that are better funded and the humanities for example are less so. I began to realize that if I were to continue in ministry and in chaplainry that that was just one of those facts that I would deal with. That’s pretty global in my response there, but we were expected to do it but as far as the overall reinforcement, that seemed to be somewhat short and by contrast, CPE was a very wonderful opportunity to enrich and to strengthen my ministry of comfort, caring, and bereavement support.

SM: There’s of course you’re very familiar I’m sure with the studies that have been done on psychic trauma that’s created by war. You worked with it yourself. You witnessed it yourself. I’m curious, did the military training you received did it ever focus on helping the soldier cope with the issue of first of all not only dealing with the death and the grief of their comrades, their friends, their fellow soldiers, but they’re also coping with the internal dilemma where the religious side of it there are the commandments and the commandment, “Thou Shall Not Kill,” and at the same time the very business of the military if at war is to kill, so you’ve got that internal conflict in terms of perhaps faith, and also not necessarily on the faith end of it but just on the human and the social aspect of it, we as a society condemn the act of killing, the act of murder. Yet, of course, war is the state sanctioned killing and murder for the purposes of security and whatnot and for legitimate reasons at times. Still, I’m curious if the military recognized while you were there and how perhaps this has changed for you over time based on your additional training outside the military, that this conflict that’s created internally is the human psyche. We have the rules of society, which can be broken at particular times, coupled with the psychic trauma of dealing with the fact that not only do your friends kill, but you yourself are doing the killing. Was that addressed at all?
RC: You know Steve, my sense is that yes, we were exposed to the general problem. But, we were taught and told about dealing with memorial services. We were taught about how Jewish burial rights or grieving rights were done and how the Catholics did certain things and how the Protestants were more the mainstream. But, at the same time the application of those things came down pretty much to how we came into the military and we would do memorial services or when there was a death in the family we would be called and do that kind of thing. We would discuss these things in a rather informal way, when we’d get together, and then there’d be course statements about that and right now I’m blanking on specific statements mainly because they didn’t mean a great deal to me as far as where you’d go with these things. You kind of just moved according to the need and somehow I remember in Germany when I was there from ’67 to ’70 that we had a memorial service and the chaplain was there and we did a memorial service and everybody in the unit pretty much came. When it was over with, well, it was kind of over with. I guess that the ritual – that’s a good term – the ritualizing of grief was expected to serve pretty much the needs. It’s only been in more recent years that I realize that ritual is as important as it is and I certainly would never not do ritual funerals or ritual kind of things, but I really want to get to the person and in those days somehow I didn't feel like I was very well equipped to do that for whatever formal kind of statements were made when we got together for monthly chaplain’s meetings or what have you.

SM: How about dealing with the issue of psychic trauma not just caused by grieving and the death of friends, but the psychic trauma caused by the very act of killing? Was that discussed much?

RC: Not particularly, but I guess one of the places, I see my history more in terms of the readings that I’ve done and one of the early readings that I did was by Carl Nininger when he pointed out that about half of the draft age people, young men at the beginning of World War II, were not qualified on emotional ground. To unpack that, these people were, unless they were born genetically with deficits, were people whose life experience had already damaged them so that by the time they could have been in the service, they were emotionally not equipped. That was a startling remark. He presented this detail to Franklin Roosevelt for example in this book. That was a startling thing. Then I would see people and know about people in the military who would rather
collapse whenever they would deal with these emotional things and I guess the social psychiatry answer was the one that was at the bottom line; well, if you can’t cut it in the military, we’ll give you a discharge, medical discharge usually or a general discharge under honorable conditions or something. But, you were no longer able to be at the function there. So, I guess my overall statement is that the military was aware of the problem but the nature of it’s mission is not very well equipped to bless a lot of support in people coping with this kind of conflict other than to give people assignments to non-combatant roles or to grant them a discharge on the basis of conscientious objection, and I did see that, and chaplains were in on that kind of thing and we did help to counsel people at that time. We still were not pacifists and we still were obliged by our initial vow that we made when we came in that we would support the military. We ourselves had to deal with this kind of conflict and all this struggle with it. It was personal, it was what we found in the nature of the military constitution and then as we found people not being able to fit into that system and we just struggled with it.

SM: You went to Korea?
RC: Yes.
SM: I guess if you would quickly outline again your duty assignments before you went to Vietnam?
RC: Basic course at Fort Slokum and then Fort Dix with the 716th Military Police Battalion which was for a year and a half to Korea, 121st Evac Hospital which was probably my first hospital experience and I’ve since had most of the rest of my career in hospital ministry. Then I came back to Fort Hood and I was with 1st Armored Division and several combat units, ending with 1st Armored Division Artillery and then I went to Germany and I was with the Engineers there for three years and then it was from there to Vietnam for ’70 and ’71 and then career course followed that and that was’71 and ’70. Two things happened there the career course, and I did the masters in guidance and counseling from Long Island University at the same time, and then there was a reduction in force and after that I was in the reserve for about 17 years, most of which was with the 94th General Hospital in Mesquite.

SM: Why don’t we talk quickly about Korea? I was curious first of all what time period were you at the evacuation hospital?
RC: It was ’64 and ’65. Hostilities were long since over with, open hostilities. The DMZ was still very much the focus of military attention. I visited [Panmunjan] one time and was aware of the DMZ, Demilitarized Zone. It didn’t seem like to me that there was much except kind of a holding action, and they did meet there at the conference table periodically but seemed like nothing much got resolved. But, neither was any great threat. I mentioned earlier how there was so much fraternization with the local women and what a moral travesty that turned out to be for our service people. It may have been that without a real viable military mission that people could really relate to that there was kind of a loss of purpose, “What are we doing here? What’s going on?” There was a lot...[anewy?], I think that’s a word that would fit that I experienced while I was there. What do you do with that? That, by the way, is a lot of the overall military experience. I can’t give this direct quote, but military life is comprised of long stretches of boredom and monotony interspersed with occasional really shocking apocalyptic horror. When you don’t have those shocking experiences, well, the military can be just really boring. There seemed to be a lot of boredom and monotony in the military experience in Korea that people filled up with women and alcohol. In Vietnam there wasn’t so much the fraternization of women because we didn’t have the same access to civilian populations, but in Korea there was just an awful lot of that.

SM: Well, you worked in the evacuation hospital?

RC: Yes.

SM: Were there many...

RC: War casualties?

SM: Yes, sir, because of course as you pointed out even though the war had wound down, there was still a lot of contest going on in the DMZ itself, so there had been occasional casualties over the years in the DMZ and Korea?

RC: We just didn’t see many casualties. Now one thing that we did have, there were lots of orphanages over there, mixed blood orphanages which Pearl Buck was an early promoter of such facilities. In fact, I think that one that she established was not far from where I was assigned, but there were orphanages all over and mixed blood children were at a great risk and not very well incorporated in Korea society because they represented the foreign soldier, local woman liaison, the mixed blood. It’s kind of like
the mulatto in the United States. But, since Korea prided itself on being an isolated
country but somehow war did come there that these kids were there. The orphanages
would oftentimes be sponsored by a unit and the 121st sponsored an orphanage for blind
children. They were not so much the mixed blood children. They were the children who,
in their play, would detonate a land mine left after the war and destroy their eyesight. It’s
kind of curious that two nights ago I was at the United Nations Association Chapter
Meeting here in Dallas and our special presentation was about participating in clearance
of land mines for our chapter in Cambodia later this year and the land mine issue was
something that was very...now that I look back, a very present problem in the Korean
situation and still is. It’s a terrible thing. But, that was something that we contended
with, particularly in the back areas where people tried to raise rice and live their lives.
We would occasionally have Korean children go out to the 121st Evac Hospital because
of injuries from the land mines and also detonated shells that had not gone off and had
been lying there for years and a kid would play with them and such. That was a part of it.

SM: Was there much of an effort to try to educate the civilian population at all to
move or to not mess with those [?]?

RC: The psy ops efforts was something that I knew about but wasn’t terribly
close to. I don’t have a real specific feel for that. In fact, I think that S5-G5, that’s the
way psy ops is a pretty weak part of the military, and especially in peacetime. Maybe
that’s an incorrect generalization, but we were much more on the operations and the
command focus and mission and training for the military mission and the military
generally. Occasionally, and there were a few times that I would be connected with the
civilian population. I always had been looking for opportunities to meet with people who
are members of the Church of Christ and we had a Korean mission there and the Korean
Christian College and I was on occasion involved with those people. I would go to
meetings or meet with them for informal gatherings or what have you. So, I would have
that kind of experience. As far as Vietnam was concerned, there was a guy who
represented our church. He was at this benefit symposium at Lubbock a couple of times,
and he was there this year. I’ve usually tried to at least be aware of the mission activity
and give encouragement or become acquainted with those people as I had the
opportunity, which would be somewhat on the margin of what I did. I did do a Church of
Christ service in Korea and have done those from time to time in addition to the general Protestant service, which was where the larger energy was usually put by Protestant chaplains, and that was the case with me.

SM: Now were you prepared to conduct all types of different services; Catholic, Baptist-Protestant, Church of Christ Protestant?

RC: The regulation is very reasonably definitive on this that catholic priests do catholic services and Rabbis do Jewish services, and when a Protestant Chaplain, the miscellaneous file if you will, is all the rest, we were never expected to violate our church traditions. On the other hand, we were made aware that we should make available religious resources to people of different persuasions and this was not limited to Judeo Christian traditions. I remember when I was in Germany that there was black...not exactly black Muslim but a black expression that didn't quite fit into the categories that were pretty well established and we tried to make space for those people as best we could, but there was some sense that they were walking away from American culture if you will. It may have been, as far as that particular thing was to say integration had failed and we need to be taking care of ourselves. That was a small thing but nevertheless I remember it. If we had Muslim people, generalists, we were supposed to make available to them opportunities to participate in their worship service. If a person wanted to go to some kind of retreat or something we were supposed to do that. Oh, that was something! In Korea and in Germany too there were retreats and I was the director of a couple of Church of Christ retreats at the retreat center and that’s a place where the military and the missionary and civilian people could all convene and do that, and we did that sort of thing also in Germany Bertchesgarden at the retreat center there. Then there would be general Protestant retreats or women’s retreats and then there would be Catholic and Jewish retreats, too, at these retreat centers and that was the way it was set up. That could take a fair amount of energy and focus for that limited experience. That was a way that we were integrated with...the military was integrated with the civilians.

SM: You raise a very interesting point and issue, and that is of course during this period when you were active duty military there was an increased rise of the Black Muslim movement in the United States. So, do you recall were there many black Muslims that you encountered or witnessed during your time?
RC: I don’t know if there were many as far as numbers were concerned, but it was certainly a presence that we were aware of and we would...I don’t remember many conversations directly with them but in Germany I did have a conversation with a young man and he was just...he was rather charismatic it seemed like to me and I marched to a different drum. I’ve forgotten how that came out. I think that there might have been occasions when people were separated from the military simply because their religion just wasn’t able to be integrated into the military community, but that’s a pretty vague memory for me. They didn’t blend in at all with the military community as a whole.

SM: Do you know if they were granted their prayer times during the day?

RC: Yeah, I think that that was respected as possible. But, even for general protestant expressions or catholic expressions or Jewish expressions, those things were respected. But, the military mission did have it’s priority and so you couldn’t just categorically say, “I’m going to take off because this is my holy day,” and get that case. Now, the Jewish people probably got a better space made available for them. I remember one young man who wanted to get off on the weekend for his whole holy day, it may have been a festival he was going to, but seemed like that he may have been pushing the envelope a little bit far about how much time he took off to get to where he needed to go and that kind of thing, and I was advised by one of the chaplains not to bother that, to let that alone because it could create problems larger than we needed to deal with. So, that may sound rather opportunistic or following the expediency but I do have that in my memory when I was in Germany. I did a wedding, by the way, for an American couple, a GI in Korea and he had left his Jewish fiancé pregnant so she actually came to Korea and I did a lot to help him and her to get their marriage legal by signing the marriage registry and so. I had worked closely with the Rabbi to provide whatever religious service was to be the case and fortunately the Rabbi that I originally worked with was an old guy, older man, and very understanding of the situation and so he was very cooperative. But, he was replaced by the time that this young woman appeared so the new Rabbi was not nearly as encouraging to them in what they were doing. So, turned out that they asked me to do the ceremony and I said, “I’m not going to change my Christian beliefs!” I could tell you a lot of funny things about this. It was a real funny experience.

SM: Well, go ahead.
RC: Let’s see. The young man would have been willing to go back to the States on a leave to marry her but if he had done that he was very clear that he would not return to Korea, even if he went AWOL. Well, that wasn’t working. So, time would pass and so it turned out that the father of the bride said the only way to take care of this is to send his daughter to Korea and have her come back married to this guy, so he did. I was with this young man helping him to get to the airport because you don’t have a lot of freedom of movement on your own when you’re an enlisted person, so anyway, I was talking with them and we went over there to get her when she arrived and this crush of Koreans came through the airport at Tempo and we didn’t know what to expect, whether she’d be in tears or whatever, but whenever she appeared she threw herself into John’s arms so it was a delightful reunion supposedly. But, I did hear him say, “Are you alone?” I suppose he was looking over her shoulder to see if Papa was there with a shotgun! Anyway, the wedding that we put together, I said, “Well, we can have just a few people,” but, “Oh no, we want to have the whole unit involved.” Here’s this Jewish young woman who’s five months pregnant, very obviously so, and this Protestant Christian Chaplain doing the ceremony and assorted nurses and GI’s sitting in this congregation, not too large, but I could just feel the tittering that was going on while this was transpiring. They stayed around there and there seemed to be absolutely no sense of embarrassment or shame, not that one should be I suppose, but you’d think that under the circumstances people might be a little more private about it. But, she stayed for two weeks over there and it was very comfortable and delighted to be with him. It was an interesting Far East wedding and honeymoon she had!

SM: What kind of ceremony did you provide?

RC: I did just the regular thing. I don’t think I over emphasized Christianity, but today I probably would be much more accommodating because I’m a smarter guy. Christianity is not going to rise or fall if I fail to say the name of Jesus a prescribed number of times. By the way, now there’s an issue that’s more serious and is serious even today. How do you do ministry and even ask a question earlier, how do you do ministry when you’re ministering to people whose faith persuasion is quite different from yours. Monday I did an invocation at 11 o’clock for Asia and South Pacific Island week celebration. In Dallas, we have a very obvious presence of people who are from that...
neighborhood with a variety of religions that they bring and we have mosques here and we have Buddhist temples and what have you that are rather recent, and lots of Vietnamese Southeast Asians, or at least we have those people present and we are not unaware of them. So, here I am with an invocation over this setting and I was very careful not to presume or to project a Christian overlay. Some of the chaplains don’t know quite what to do with it. I wasn’t particularly skillful at it but I was attentive that you don’t presume religious...you do not presume your religious commitment within a military formation, though I have known chaplains to lead a prayer, a Christian prayer, in the presence of men in formation and I personally am extremely offended by that kind of thing because it shows so little sensitivity to people who don’t agree. But, people, for one thing, are disaffected from any religious commitment at the age that they come in the military. So, to impose and to presume is really to set up a lot of anger and resistance and people even take action to get that corrected. But anyway, that’s the climate in which we military chaplains found ourselves and the longer I was in the military and now at the VA the more sensitive I’ve become and able to see myself as a Christian and function an articulate Christian statement without being offensive or ignoring the feelings and sensibilities who are not at all who I am. But, that was very much something that I had to deal with all through my military career.

SM: Was that again in terms of professional development and training, did they press the issue?

RC: Yes, we talked a great deal about that sort of thing because we had to help people of other faith expressions find the opportunities and when we could we would try to find the religious leaders that would help them to achieve or find their faith expressions. As a matter of fact, just yesterday I was called for a second time, this time for the wife of a Jewish patient, to have our Jewish Rabbi come or make contact with her for an appointment. I mentioned that yesterday because that’s the kind of thing that we were instructed and helped to do from basic course. That was one of the things that we were taught, basic and also career, and then in our monthly orientations those kinds of things would be discussed with examples and all.

SM: How about the issue of the separation between church and state and the fact that here you are as a military chaplain and this is a very fine line?
RC: Yeah.
SM: Was that discussed much?
RC: It certainly was, and I think there may have even been a denomination that
withdrew endorsement of its chaplains or at least came close. Why am I vague on this?
Particularly during the ‘60s, the chaplainry and anything that would suggest a connection
of church and state, the ACLU and a lot of other initiatives were really...and the
chaplainry was very much a focus of attention in that, but as you know the Constitution
not only talks about the separation of church and state but also talks about free exercise
and the free exercise had always obtained and made it possible for the chaplainry to
continue. But, the quota system by which chaplains and churches are invited or religious
groups are invited to submit people for commission as chaplains now is beginning to be
used for inclusion of Muslim women. That’s a different issue, but Muslims and I guess
Buddhists. I don't keep up that literature as clearly as I might, but I know that if you have
a certain quota and somehow a 50,000 population, it hits me that may not be right, but
say we have this many population against the national population you’re accorded one
space per chaplainry in the military, whatever that formula is. One says well if you have
one per people on this quota and people are distributed all over, how in the world can you
do the coverage? It’s just the best that we can do. We can’t do it better than that. But,
yeah, the testing of the chaplainry comes up periodically and is discussed in the courts.
But, somehow chaplainry has survived all of those challenges on the strength of the free
exercise clause.
SM: I’m curious about other issues within the chaplainry itself, within the
chaplain’s force, in particular my own experience in my own religious experience. I’ve
been exposed to certain conflicts within particular denominations. For instance, I am
personally aware of certain Baptist denominations that view Catholicism as basically idol
worship, the Pope is the anti-Christ. There is not just within different groups of religion,
Islam and Christianity, but within the religions themselves, Christianity in particular, the
different sects have some conflicts. Did you ever encounter anything like that as a
chaplain?
RC: Now if I’m understanding, you say there are things you felt so strongly about are religious expressions that would want to oppose those things, let’s suppose that say idol worship did I hear you say?

SM: Yes, sir, like I said, I’ve been exposed to certain Baptist groups that think that Catholicism is basically idol worship.

SM: It’s a little vague where I ran into this. Oh, I know where it was; in the University of North Texas when I was doing some graduate study over there, we looked at some of the decisions, the court decisions that were implemented during the ‘60s, and the ‘60s which have been looked on by ultra-conservatives as the nadir of American life! Nevertheless, legally, and as far as court decision was concerned they really called us once again to a clearer understanding of what it would be to be an American and to be in our democracy. One of the things that was brought up in one of those cases seemed to be related to such practices as the use of peyote intoxicants to assist in religious devotions.

The decision was made that free exercise of religion is permitted unless it can be known as destructive to community and human values, and there are certain things that can be claimed as religious. I used reference to peyote where that can be opposed and be legislated against on the basis of the fact that it’s destructive to human values. That kind of thing, we had to begin to be aware of that sort of thing because there were people who wanted to do all sorts of things, and call it religious. There are certain limits that have to be put. It’s kind of like polygamy. I’ve read about this guy who was convicted recently of having five wives. You saw it. Those kinds of things, there are limits that Constitutionally can be placed on people for doing things that they call valid for their religion.

SM: I’m curious about conflict between mainstream denominations. Have you witnessed anything like that as a chaplain? Again, my own experience was Baptist; the Christian Baptist Church is very emotionally opposed to Catholicism, again, two mainstream denominations in Christianity. So, I was wondering if you ever witnessed anything like that in the military, a kind of contest or conflict between mainstream denominations?

RC: You know, when you commit yourself, when you accept a commission in the military as a chaplain. You already have said, “I will cooperate,” and I said a vow,
what is it, whatever you sign off on. You commit yourself to be cooperative, to 
cooperate and to assist and that is all spelled out in the Army regulations. You know, if 
you commit to that and then show that you really did that with tongue in cheek or with 
reservation, that’s a real personal kind of a thing, and that doesn't mean you have to 
commit to everything because there’s a great deal of opportunity for you to express 
yourself. But, well, I’m trying to figure out how to respond to this. Take proselytizing, 
that’s something you’ve edged up to. Over my spiritual development, I have decided, 
and this has become clear that one tells...recruiting is not good news. I’m committed to 
tell good news, as I understand it. I can say that because I follow Jesus...or I follow Jesus 
because he seems to make the best good news out there, and if anybody wants to know or 
is curious about what that is, I can do that. But, I can do that without saying, “Now you 
need to stop being a Catholic. You need to be baptized as a Christian if you’re Muslim.” 
I can tell the good news that I believe I find in Jesus without being a big recruiter. A lot 
of evangelism or what passes as evangelism, which by the way, that word is related to 
good news, a lot of that mounts to recruitment and I’ve come to decide that I don’t need 
to do that. That has been in process with me for my whole ministry career; how do you 
deal with people who are different and who are probably never going to commit to my 
way of doing? Having come to a clearer understanding of how to be of my faith without 
imposing or pressuring people, that’s been a major spiritual part of my spiritual 
pilgrimage and today I feel very comfortable. Nobody expects me not to be a member of 
the Church of Christ and in letting people know how that fits, both in my life and in what 
I think community life ought to be, I’m much more comfortable. It may have made me 
much more [ecumenical] and incidentally I think that people who really struggle over 
what to do with crass evangelism, I think they do become more accommodating to 
variety. I know that I have. I think that’s one of the opportunities in the military. I may 
have mentioned to you in an earlier interview that there’s some people in the 
congregation who like it not to have to commit to or say that they commit or to assume 
that they commit to programs that they are indifferent to or even opposed to. You 
mentioned Baptists; I think, and my recent reading has touched on anti-Semitism and the 
history of anti-Semitism, the preaching of trying to convert Jews in Chicago by the 
Baptists, that to me is inappropriate as a Christian. I don’t think Jesus would have me do
that so to speak, and I would feel obligated to state that we really have to let people be
who they are. But, occasionally in the military we would find people who would be very
zealous at what they were up to. We would have to cope with that and one way or
another, it may not have been my responsibility, but like suppose I were supervisory
chaplain, I certainly would counsel such a person how he or she might modify that
behavior, and I would certainly share a tolerance of probably drawing some...but using
religious text we’ll say to promote tolerance, and there are plenty of them that would do
that.

SM: And I guess I should say to make sure that anybody that reads the transcript
or listens to this interview, what I was stating in terms of the Baptist perspective, being
critical of Catholicism is not my own personal view but is one that I have personally
witnessed in a number of churches, and I’m not saying that Baptists are anti-Catholic or
vice-versa. I just want to make sure that that’s in there!

RC: Oh no, no. In fact, if you know anything about the stereotype of the Church
of Christ, you know we have the reputation of saying we’re the only ones going to
Heaven and everyone else is going elsewhere! No, that’s a long...but so, you know,
spiritually I’ve found myself making a lot of movement. At the same time I don’t feel
like that I’ve been disloyal to the best in our heritage. I think I’m a good member of the
Church of Christ, better than a lot. I don’t mind...I can go into that when that’s
appropriate to talk about.

SM: Correct me if I’m wrong, but it seems like what you’re saying is that the
oath of commission that each officer makes to the nation, to the constitution, to the
military branch in which they serve, in your particular instance or service in the Army
that helped you create basically a brotherhood of officers first and chaplains or ministers
second, and that helped foster tolerance and acceptance. Yes, we have different faiths
here and we all have to work together to work the same goal of at least helping the
various members of our faith worship in this military setting.

RC: Yeah, as far as tolerance is concerned, religious things, yeah, I think that
that’s fine. When you bring up about the national purpose or goal, I really can get real
Prophetic about that. I think that the nation needs to be very attentive to the environment
for example. I think that the suffering of combat veterans, I think that that needs to be on
the agenda. I think it needs to be very much at the table. Anytime some major social
good is not being very well attended to, I can get prophetic about it. At the same time, I
don’t want to do violence while I’m promoting and encouraging the best that I can find.
Sometimes that kind of a fine line to draw. Christians in Germany felt like it was a
Christian thing to do to assassinate Hitler and I think I would have a tough time joining in
that orientation. But, one can be prophetic without giving into anything goes simply
because we’re tolerant Americans.

SM: Well thank you sir. This will end...[end of recording].

SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Chaplain Russel Carver
on the 11th of June, 2001 at approximately 9:05 Lubbock time. I am in Lubbock, Texas
and Chaplain Carver is in Dallas. Sir, why don’t we go ahead and begin today’s
discussion with your experiences in Vietnam. I guess it would be appropriate first to
begin with if you would tell me what you knew about what was happening in Vietnam,
how aware you were of political aspects, things like that.

RC: Well in 1970 when I was on orders to go to Vietnam I had spent three years
in Europe and somehow I had not been very careful to listen to the news and that kind of
thing. I knew people were going from Europe to Vietnam for assignments and all and
one thing that I was aware of in the military is that the line, “It’s the only war that we
have,” and career officers particularly wanted to as we say get their ticket punched so that
they could set them up for best opportunity for career development. Well, that was no
part of my motivation. I was a chaplain and I was going to serve where I was ordered to
go. So, I was aware. But, I did know that there were people who already had a second
tour over there and not being fully aware of what the situation was, even though Tet had
happened, I didn’t understand why people would present themselves for two tours. I’ve
got lots of feelings about it these days but in those days I was just kind of a bystander and
it was just another assignment, except with certain hazards and I was ready to go.

SM: Now while you were in Germany you mentioned that soldiers were going
over there sometimes for multiple tours. Did you ever encounter and talk about Vietnam
with any of those individuals, maybe in Europe or elsewhere?

RC: I was just mostly casually, nothing that comes to mind. I was not particularly
concerned. I knew that it was a war area and that kind of thing but somehow I had just
not made myself fully aware of the issues. Vietnam has really come to be much more in
my understanding since 1990 when I joined the Vietnam Veteran Minister’s Conference
because I wasn't exposed to combat over there. Somehow I just was not sufficiently
involved, as I’ve come to be.

SM: While you were in Germany, in particular before you went to Vietnam, that
was your assignment before going to Vietnam?

RC: Yes, I was three years there. Somehow it seemed like to me that the news
that we were getting that I was listening to through the Armed Services Radio and all that
kind of thing wasn’t very extensive or at least I just didn’t listen to it very well. I don’t
listen to the news much these days. I read the computer, whenever I get on my computer
I look at the headlines. I don’t subscribe to a paper. As I’ve said a lot of times, I tend to
trust the historian more than I do the reporter. I hope you take a compliment from that.

SM: I do, thank you very much!

RC: Because the media somehow focuses on particulars that it takes someone to
interpret. I give my reading energy a lot more to literature that may have taken 20 years
to get together.

SM: Well in Germany did you ever have to counsel any soldiers who perhaps
were troubled by their Vietnam experiences?

RC: No, I don’t recall having done so. That, too, really waited until 1990. By
this time I had already been with the VA for...I went there in 1987 and somehow I just
had not been sufficiently exposed to that experience. It just didn't mean as much to me.

Coming to the symposium there at Texas Tech has really heightened my awareness. I’m
amazed at how much I’m aware of Vietnam and how little I was aware at the time even
when I was stationed in country.

SM: Why don’t you go ahead and describe how you felt and what you thought
when you learned you were going to Vietnam?

RC: Well, I knew it would be a separation tour and I relocated my family. They
came to live in Dallas for that year. So, I just went and I remember landing in Vietnam.
I guess it was Tan Son Nhut that I landed in. Early when I first landed when I was in
Cam Ranh, somehow I landed in Tan Son Nhut and went to Cam Ranh and when I was in
the replacement company I met a friend who is still my very closest friend who is a
chaplain, a retired chaplain and Methodist minister in San Antonio and we talk every week and I go to see him and he comes to see me and all. He had been there before on a previous tour and maybe how I saw him and still see him is one of the reasons why I was not very focused on the war as such. For one thing, he didn’t talk about it. These days, even though I’m very much interested in anything he has to say, he’s told me a rather small amount other than the fact that he said he disliked being there very much. Somehow he doesn't seem to want to attend to that set of his memories in any great deal, which I think is very important for people who are trying to overcome that. I think he was exposed to Agent Orange. He has told some pretty horrible things that have happened to him. But, if those things have impacted him over the long run, he doesn't talk like...he doesn't come without awareness. So, I was assigned there and we were both assigned and given the same assignments. So, when we got there or before we got there he was sent to an assignment in Danang at the Depot and I was sent to the 45th Engineer Group at that time in Phu Bai which was near Hue, North of Danang.

SM: What were your first impressions of the country upon landing at Tan Son Nhut?

RC: Well it just seemed pretty bleak and pretty dry and pretty hot and I was used to BOQs that were well furnished and all that thing, and even when I was in Korea in 1964 and ’65 things were pretty well put together, but it was rather primitive where I was permanently to be assigned. We stayed up there for about three months and then moved the unit down to Danang and there things were much more settled it seemed because it was more nearly permanent quarters and headquarters buildings and all that kind of thing. In Phu Bai we were still pretty close to the ground it seemed to me. But, that was just kind of the feeling that I had about the living arrangement. My assignment was there at the headquarters and we had battalions in Quang Tri and in Chu Lai and some small units that were attached and then went over not far from where our headquarters was there, an engineer battalion had gave support to the 101st. We were at the opening of the valley that led to the A Shau Valley. It was a small valley and I had a number of units that were assigned along that valley. I never did go as far as the A Shau Valley, and in 1970 things were pretty quiet up there. There was one unit that I visited; I forgot the number of it. It was a company sized unit, and I visited them a few times and that unit did have some
casualties and I suspect that in all the time I was there that was the only unit that received...no, there was another unit that had casualties. But, this one I’ve forgotten. It was just a company-sized unit. But somehow I was not close enough to them to do anything like a memorial service or anything like that. We got a fourth battalion which was in Quin Nhon moved up to Danang and I knew that company commander, one of their company commanders rather well, and he and five or six of his unit members who were out South of Danang doing some road work, a construction battalion, and when they were assembled at a certain point, five or six of them, a hand detonated mine killed the whole five or six of them including that commander. There was a chaplain assigned to that unit and I did attend that memorial service. That was probably the most sobering experience that I had there because I really realized how close the war could be. But, that really in my memory that’s the only thing that I recall where I was personally close to anything like combat. There were a couple of times that I spent one night in Tam Ky which is on the way to Chu Lai with one of my detachments and four artillery bursts at the front gate and we went to the bunker but we were not in any danger. No one was injured at all. The other time which I thought I was in combat and that really got my attention was in Quang Tri. I was spending the night up there when the battalion chaplain was gone and the Vietnam sappers came in and brought satchel charges into the ammo dump across the road and I thought surely it was Armageddon for sure! But, again, when all the explosion was over with I came out of my hooch and I didn’t find anybody much around and finally someone told me what happened so that turned out not to be a hazard to anybody in the battalion up there. So, that pretty well covers the experiences that would have brought me in touch with immediate combat. I drove a great deal in the jeep from the headquarters. I would drive up to Quang Tri which would be through Hue up into the...to Quang Tri and then we went as far as Dong Ha and then over west there. At one time I went to Khe Sanh and sometimes it would be appropriate to have a worship service out there and I’d take the chaplain’s kit and set up on the hood of a jeep or in the motor pool somewhere and we’d have a worship service. I would drive out from Hue there along that valley that I spoke of and I would see the units out there and then the trip to Quang Tri that I told you about was down the highway that was up and down Vietnam was Route 1 and that was South of Danang, South from Danang to
Chu Lai. One time I went over to My Lai and I saw where that massacre took place. Somehow again it seemed very quiet there and uneventful. I just guess I didn't see much other than the defoliation. I saw a fair amount of that. But, the devastation of the bombing and all that kind of thing, I just didn’t see that where I was. Maybe I just wasn’t looking, I don’t know.

SM: I’m curious, one quick question; what was the entire unit designation in your unit of assignment?

RC: The 45th Engineer Group.

SM: Okay, so headquarters 45th Engineer Group?

RC: Yes.

SM: Your position?

RC: I was the group chaplain.

SM: For the group?

RC: The group chaplain.

SM: How many total chaplains worked in the group?

RC: There was one assigned to each of the battalions plus their headquarters so that would be when we had our fourth battalion that would have been four chaplains and myself, that would be five of us.

SM: You were basically the head chaplain of the group?

RC: The group chaplain.

SM: So you oversaw the other four chaplains?

RC: Right.

SM: So how much interaction would you have with the battalion chaplains?

RC: I made it my business to see them and go to where they were. I think about once a month I would go and then we would have chaplain meetings in Danang where chaplains from many units would come together. We’d usually have a training session and a meal together. When I was in Lubang I spent a lot of time and frequently got together with the chaplain Homer. That was my friend that I spoke of earlier. So, I had a fair amount of interaction with chaplains. There were chaplains other than the engineer chaplains when we moved down to Danang that I saw. I had worship services that I was obliged to conduct for the headquarters, both in Phu Bai and then down at Danang.
Danang, we were on Red Beach and shared that compound with the Marines and that was kind of interesting. The Marines are very, very active in physical training and that kind of thing. They would run to and from formations and they’d have bugle calls and all that. They really worked hard at looking great. The engineers, as I say, they were so busy with their mission they almost could not get mud off their boots in time to go to a change of command ceremony. One time we had a change of command ceremony in the second floor of our headquarters building and I always thought that was so that the Marines wouldn’t see what a rag-tag bunch of people these soldiers were because the Marines were so sharp and made such a deal about looking military when they were not of course in combat. In the Marines in ’70 and ’71 were removed from their original mission of taking beachheads and all that kind of thing in initial combat. I was aware that there were units of the Marines and perhaps Army units that were away from the coast in the I would guess foothills or over to the west for whom things were a lot less secure than they were for us. Oh, back to the chapel service; one of the nice things for me was that the chapel at Red Beach where I conducted services, it was assigned to our unit, was a grass chapel and it had been built by the Vietnamese and was very characteristic, and I loved being there. Of course we were right on the edge of the beach and in the helicopter flight zone and I almost always had to stop two or three times during every sermon to let the helicopters go by because they made such noise and there was no insulation, no acoustical insulation to keep that sound out. But, it was a very nice memory to have that and it was the only grass chapel that I saw while I was there. Had a monsoon or a windstorm come through and collapsed it, well I felt real disappointed about that but engineers came in and American style, they took four by fours and lifted the thing back up and it didn’t ever have quite the same original character but it was a nice experience. When it fell down I brought a couple of pieces of the bamboo, which are about four or five inches across and about eight inches high. They fit on my desk. To this day its one of the few mementos that I have kept but that’s kind of nice reminder of what that was. I’ll tell you one thing that I was aware of that really was distressing to me; an E3 or and E4 out of his salary could afford a heroin habit and we had a tremendous amount of drug abuse among our soldiers. I didn’t know quite what to do with that. This was early usage and so people weren’t finding it a problem to them. I remember one person that I really
did like a great deal, he overdosed and nearly lost his life. But, he recovered and seemingly with no lasting effects. I was really...that really caught me by a very devastating shock to think that he had nearly killed himself. I guess one reason why people did that was to cope with the bleakness of the assignment. In Korea, which was where I was in ’64 and ’65, it wasn’t so much drugs as it was fraternizing with the civilian women. But in Vietnam, we just didn’t have that much contact with civilians because of security things. One time when I was driving along the streets of Danang, in my jeep I had a briefcase my parents had given me and the slinky boys, those little kids along the way, one of them jumped in the jeep and stole my briefcase. So, we were really aware that that kind of thing was going on. That kind of petty stealing and things also went on in Korea. Now that is an impression that I would like to share with you. It was terribly distressing to me to see the disparity, the economic disparity between military, American military, and the local civilians because even when I’ve gone to Mexico I always feel very uncomfortable to feel that I might be by their standards rather rich and that’s a disturbing sense to me to know that by comparison that there’s such a great difference between economic standards in the United States and other countries throughout the world, especially third world countries, but I was fully aware of that. We didn’t have anything like weddings or GI’s marrying local Vietnamese national women as was the case in Korea and that too was a very disturbing thing when I was there. But to take up that slack there was a fair amount of drug abuse to help them deal with the bleakness of that assignment. When I was in Germany, we didn’t have that kind of...it seemed like that soldiers were able to cope and the American ghetto with families in Germany just made it so much better for even the single soldiers. But the soldiers who did the worst both I think in Korea and in Vietnam, both were separation tours, were the married NCOs because I think there was just a lot of things that happened to weaken their marriages and their family relationships. That was particularly noticeable in Korea but I think it probably was also true in Vietnam. Those are some impressions that I had, and I did counsel to those things as best I could. In fact, in Korea we were obligated by the command to do pre-marriage counseling of GI’s and their fiancées and I could imagine what it would be when those Korean women could hardly...like when I would be counseling them I would ask the name and they would be so shy they would hardly
mention it. If I’d ask them what the address was they could not understand the word
address. They could not communicate at all and it seemed like all they did or must have
been able to do, the GI, was communicate with the language of love! Man, then after I
got back I saw some of these couples and the Korean women were really in lots of
trouble unless they got real active about getting integrated into American society and I
think most of those marriages were troubled and a lot of them failed. But, we didn’t have
that much intermarriage in Vietnam as I’ve already indicated because we didn't have that
much contact.

SM: What month did you arrive in Vietnam?
RC: I arrived in June, and returned about the same time in the year later.
SM: In ’71? Got you. How about memorial services?
RC: The one I spoke of is the one that I remember. It was the battalion chaplain
conducted that. He may have asked me to assist in a reading or something, but
everybody was there. That’s one of the things that you can depend on. When there’s a
casualty or death of a member, everybody goes to the service. Seems like I remember
and its vague what happened. In Germany we had a member to lose his life maybe in a
traffic accident, and that was in my unit and I was a part of that and probably conducted
that and everybody came. Jumping to the present at the VA we have a quarterly, well,
memorial service and now it’s going to become every two months and that service is to
honor those veterans who have died in the previous months. Now it’s going to be every
two months as I said. That is so reminiscent of what memorial services were when I was
on active duty because we may have three to 500 people attending these memorial
services together with Dallas and Bonham, which we’re in the same North Texas
Healthcare System. We may have 300 in Dallas and 125 or 50 in Bonham at these
services and the families come to honor their dead and I’m always interested in people
who come to such affairs. Some dress up very well. I remember when I was in Germany
we had a change of command ceremony. The officer’s families would come dressed up
for those occasions and then the NCO’s and others might come rather casual and dressed
down, same thing at the VA. It’s very much the same feel; the big difference of course in
Vietnam would be that there were no families there. But, there’s something about the
military family experience where everybody goes to the memorial service.
SM: Can you recall about how many memorial services total were conducted for the group while you were there?

RC: Well I suspect that it was that one mainly and maybe two or three, but since that was the only one I was really a part of that’s the only one I remember. But, they were going on all the time in the various units around, and I knew that.

SM: You mean down at battalion?

RC: No, in other military units throughout Vietnam, and I still hear chaplains talk about that kind of thing or service people tell about those things because they are big events.

SM: How much would you interact with the group commander and in what capacity would he typically seek your guidance?

RC: Well we had our staff meetings, which I guess were weekly and I always attended those. When I was at the battalion I would attend their staff meetings or their activities, too. The training, that was one thing that I did. I did a series of training things called the Military Leader’s Commander as counselor where I pointed out that counseling was like everything else a function of command and the chaplain was called on to be the commander’s counselor, but everyone had responsibility to do that. There was a field manual with such a title as The Military Leader’s Commander as counselor. One of the points that I made in that training was that because staff works for command, that command even down to corporal could call on the staff officer, in this case chaplain, to assist him in carrying out counseling responsibilities and in that I would usually find an E5 sergeant and I’d say, “Who commands who? Do I command you or you command me?” and here I would be a major or whatever I was at the time. What was my rank while I was there? I guess I was a lieutenant colonel. It was pretty hard. I’d say, “No, you command me because staff works for the commander and you are the first person in the chain of command.” I felt good about that because it helped them to realize that no matter how few people were in their span of control, that they could call on staff persons to help them support that and be well within their military responsibility to do that kind of thing. I felt that I had a good rapport with people in the command structure. In my earlier conversation, first year or so when I was in service, I didn’t understand that connection between command and staff. But, boy, my life became much, much simpler
whenever I said, “I’m working for the commander no matter where he is in the chain of command.” When I could write a letter and prepare somebody else’s signature block and feel that that was exactly the way it ought to be, I felt much easier about what I was doing. I understood the military; I still do. I still understand that even in the VA that chaplain is largely a staff officer working for the director and so it’s not that I don’t jump chain of command, I don’t do it in a blatant fashion, but I’m very well aware of who answers to who in the structure. I think that a lot of civilian people or people who’ve never been in the military don’t quite understand that but I think it’s a big lesson to learn. Part of the reason why that was an issue for me is because in the Churches of Christ we’re so very congregational that supervision is rather casual shall we say. It’s not like in the Episcopal Church or the Catholic Church, the Lutherans or Methodists. In congregational churches, lines of demand are not very strongly defined. Since I grew up in that environment and was a minister and before that was there, it took something for me to become acquainted with that because I not only grew up in the church, but I was in a church that did not have elders assigned in a home mission church in Massachusetts and that was a major issue for me to discover. It was a long time in really taking that into myself, but it certainly has simplified my life since I’ve been able to make that second nature.

SM: Well, how much would you get down to the subordinate units and just interact with the typical soldier, just one on one type of discussions or maybe you with the squad or team?

RC: That was mostly in the headquarters. It was pretty good sized. I guess we had 100 or so people. There was a fair amount of that. I did a lot of interaction. When I was with the battalions who had their own chaplains I was always deferred to the battalion chaplain. But, I always have spent a lot of time with the soldiers and my style, even today, I try not to be strictly formal about getting people to come to the office on a schedule and that kind of thing. I try to go to where they are and just sit down and talk with them so that it doesn't look like that there’s anything special going on though we would address very, very specific questions and issues and we might just step to one side or that kind of thing or people did come to the office, or we might meet at the snack bar or something like that. I’ve always tried to make it where it was not real obvious because
for some people, whether it’s people in the chain of command or whether it’s NCOs or
whatever, you’ve got a problem and you’ve got to see the chaplain. People...how do I put
it, they didn’t feel like that people...no, they felt like that people might use their contact
with the chaplain to escape responsibility or duty and that kind of thing, spend too much
time at the chapel thinking and going back and forth and when I knew that somebody
might merit conversations from time to time I would usually try to let that happen where
it didn’t seem to call attention to the fact that they were spending time with the chaplain.

SM: When you identified one of the major problems being drug use, did you
work at all with the group commander or battalion commanders? Was there any kind of
plan put into place to try to deal with this problem?

RC: I know more about...I remember more in Germany because we actually
had...in those days we had a monthly training thing that chaplains are obliged to conduct
called character guidance and that was on a...I may have mentioned that earlier. In those
meetings we could touch on drugs and unsafe sex and all of that could come up. One
time in Germany when I was again the group chaplain I sponsored a day’s workshop or a
half-day’s workshop that talked about drugs and I brought different people to speak on
the subject. In Vietnam, the mission kind of worked against our getting together for unit
sized or even company sized gatherings for training. It’s not that we never did anything
like that, it’s just that we didn’t have the luxury of doing a half a day session. When we
got together it was an hour and it was not as I recall on a regular basis. The character
guidance program was somehow being phased out. In fact, I think it even took a different
name by the time I got to Vietnam and I think that was because church and state issues
began to kind of express itself. Now that I think back about that and I’m thinking about
it, the Vietnam era brought a lot of challenge on the chaplainry on the part of certain
religious groups. I think the one church threatened to cease to endorse its chaplains. I
don’t know that they followed through on that. There were Supreme Court cases or cases
in court where chaplainry was challenged on the grounds of violated the separation of
church and state. Free exercise clause in the constitution has always been able to...the
chaplainry to survive. One of the things that has happened in my time is that women
have been added to the military. They weren't when I was on active duty as I recall.
That must have been late ‘80s or the ‘90s, maybe mid-‘80s, I don’t have an exact date.
Also, I think that we have gotten some chaplains from Oriental religious groupings or maybe Muslims. I don't know if you know, there’s a quota system. I don't know what the exact figure is, but if your faith group represents we’ll say 50 or 100,000 people of the total American population, you’re accorded one space, chaplain space. Baptists of course have maybe several hundred spaces because they’re the most populace religious group in the nation, and Catholics and Lutherans. But, our church has I think we must have 40 or 50. I can’t give you that, but there is a population quota. To be democratically fair, these groups that have not traditionally had military chaplains are now included to apply to have those spaces endorsed.

SM: What were the predominant denominations of the chaplains working in your group?

RC: The chaplains? Let’s see.

SM: Of course you represented the Church of Christ.

RC: My church is Church of Christ and a couple of them were Baptist as I recall and one was a Lutheran. I didn’t have a Catholic. The Rabbis and the priests, Rabbis were nearly always in the major headquarters because there were so few of them. The Catholics, the Bishops never wanted to turn loose of them. Priests even to this very day are rather in short supply across the board. The bishop’s rather reluctant to give up then which meant that. Catholic coverage was done at the larger headquarters usually. Now when I was in Phu Bai we did have a Catholic chaplain assigned to a battalion sized unit as I recall. In fact, he’s still a good friend of mine and I see him in the Vietnam Veteran Minister’s Conference. But in my own engineer group, there are mostly Baptists. There was some rotation, but Baptists and myself and the Lutheran that I spoke of.

SM: Now if a soldier in the group, if his denomination was not represented, was there an option, a way of getting to a service, for instance Catholic?

RC: Catholics usually had a mass somewhere within range to do that. Jewish people would have the holy day opportunity. I remember in Germany that more was made of that than in Vietnam. Sometimes the distance between these small groupings and the opportunity to participate in their religious activities were minimal. It became the chaplain’s responsibility to make available the opportunity to the extent that we were able to do. It was practically in the military mission. A lot of times people just said, “Well,
I’ll take care of my devotions the best way I can,” because this is an unusual situation, though there were some people who wanted to be very careful. I don’t believe we had retreats. We had retreat centers both in Europe and in Korea but I don’t believe we had a retreat center in Vietnam. So, retreats, which would be denominational retreats, or protestant retreats or catholic retreats or Jewish retreats were not something we had available to us in Vietnam as we did in the other places.

SM: Were there any concerns or complaints as far as not having a particular denomination represented?

RC: The reality was that people dealt with the reality usually pretty well. One thing, and I didn't see this so much in Vietnam as I did in Europe, we had a big awareness of what were called Black Muslims. The political and social/political climate of the Vietnam era was to cause people to be articulate and that was as I say more noticeable in Germany - ’67 to ’70 is when I was there – than it was when I was in Korea or Vietnam. People just gave their energy to...they didn’t give their energy that way to making demands for expression in Korea and Vietnam as they did in Germany or in the United States at that time. When I was in Vietnam, there was a lot of questioning of our mission and our presence there. People really felt like that it was a waste of time, the mission didn’t make much sense, we shouldn’t be there. All the things that had made the media and a lot of things that had been said there at the symposium at the Vietnam Center in Lubbock, that was the mood that was very visible and apparent among the troops there in Vietnam. I think I probably noticed that a little less in the headquarters because we were busy with our administrative things, but when you would get out into the boonies and all that kind of thing, you’d hear people saying, “What are we doing here?” Incidentally, I guess it was probably the second or the third symposium that I came to, I guess it was the one on strategy, were you there at that one when General Massan was there and Harry Summer’s book was reviewed, were you there?

SM: Was that 1996?

RC: Let’s see, there’ve been five that I could have gone to and I think I’ve gone to four. I think it was the second one so working back from today that would probably be ’97 or ’98.

SM: I think I was at that conference.
RC: Anyway, General Massan was up there and as I recall his last sentence, one of the things that stood out in my memory, he said, “If we had a strategy in Vietnam or Southeast Asia, it was abandonment,” and that was the final word of his formal presentation. I thought, “Man!” That hit me and that certainly was something I could read back from my memory and my experience there because not that I felt that we were abandoning at that point but the uselessness that people felt about the mission and Hershel, my friend, retired Methodist chaplain friend, very strongly articulated, “This is useless. We shouldn't be there,” and there were just a lot of people who felt that we did our time and we need to get out of there.

SM: Were those feelings shared amongst the ranks and MOS’s, enlisted and officer?

RC: I think so. Now people didn't get mutinous or anything like that, but it was a lot of, “What are we doing here?” I personally think that Vietnam was a defining experience in some ways more than World War I or World War II because I was talking to a classicist yesterday from I think it was California. We’re hosting the Golden Age Games here in Dallas at VA this week so there was a special service that I was a part of in that setting which was in a high school nearby. This man came and he was a classicist I think in the University of California. So, as I was talking to him I said, “Have you ever read the book by Jonathon Shay, Achilles in Vietnam,” and he had not heard of that. I could tell it rather peaked his interest because I told him that I had just been over the Iliad at our Institute of Culture and Humanities here in Dallas and that book was brought up at the institute while we were doing that, but this guy I was talking to yesterday, he immediately associated Achilles and the Trojan War with World War II, and from my understanding, World War II and Vietnam were not the same animal. We won, whatever won means, in World War II and we didn’t win in Vietnam. The war experience in Vietnam was much more similar in my understanding to the Trojan War as reported in The Iliad, than any of the wars were we have conducted, maybe the Revolution comes closer, but we were kind of, it would be the British that would have experienced what the Greeks did in The Iliad, because again we won and I think Vietnam was just kind of a unique American experience. The Civil War, again was not like the Trojan War, it doesn’t seem to me, because we were aware, we were struggling to preserve union, and I
know that even in the Confederate states there were moods of we still belong to the United State. German immigrants here in Texas, I paid attention to them, didn’t see the point of secession. I saw that when I went to a museum in New Braunfels, that awareness was brought to my attention several years ago. We really didn’t feel that we had enemies in the Civil War in the same way that we felt like we had one in Vietnam and the Trojan War, you certainly did have a sense of, you know, we’re enemies of each other. That book is certainly very well worth reading it seems to me, and I want people to know about it who have an interest in what was going in the Vietnam era.

SM: This will end the interview with Chaplain Carver on the 11th of June.

Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner, continuing the interview with Chaplain Russell Carver on the 18th of June 2001, approximately 9:15 Lubbock time. I am in Lubbock, Texas and Chaplain Carver is in Dallas, Texas. Sir, why don’t we go ahead and begin with the discussion of your trip home from Vietnam, and if you would describe the process of leaving Vietnam, how you felt, what the trip back to the United States was like and the of course, the reception received here.

Russell Carver: My return trip was pretty uneventful, I just went to Tan Son Nhut on the proper day, and caught the plane and came back and there was nothing eventful, positive or negative on my arrival at Travis, guess it was. And I just went to my next assignment, even long before we had this interview, especially after I was in the National Conference of Vietnam Veteran Ministers, I began wondering why was this so, why was I so casual about, going to, being at, and leaving Vietnam. It just seemed like it was just another assignment, without any major ups and downs, or anything that really caught my attention. That was the thing about Vietnam came in 1990 with my joining the Vietnam Veterans Ministers Conference, however there may be some things in the interim there, form 71 to 1990 that you would like us to discuss.

SM: Yes, sir, certainly.

RC: I had gone to career course next. That was a kind of a usual kind of a thing, just kind of catching us up to date, reviewing where we had been and where we were going. Such an issue as unit assignment versus area coverage, or chaplain was very much on my mind because that turned out to be a problem issue in my own chaplain career. Let me explain that. Every chaplain is assigned to a unit and has, in the unit, has a
responsibility for rating and endorsing, you know, giving efficiency reports. Alongside
of that, as far as chaplains are concerned, we have what’s called area coverage. That may
be who we oblige to, or courtesy or assigned coverage to units that do not have a chaplain
either to be assigned at all, or temporarily without one assigned to a chaplain slot. That
and/or area coverage which has to do with families, you know, and I’ve had some posts
where we had lots of families, whether the assignment may be, there’s anything as
elaborate as Sunday School to youth programs, retreats and on and on and on, that are not
directly related to the unit to which one is assigned. Well, you know, that’s a kind of a
slippery slope to walk on, you know, and if you fall in the direction of area coverage when
rating time comes, it may work against you, which is what happened in my case, you
know, wanting to be that good Christian minister that I always have felt called to, at least
as I understood it, I fell in the direction of area coverage, at least in part of my military
assignment, not so much in Vietnam because I was pretty well identified with the unit
there. At the end of the career course, I was a part of a reduction in force and that seemed
to be related to some less than wonderful efficiency reports that took place. That was a
very difficult thing to realize that after ten years on active duty I was to find other ways to
express my ministry and so that made a major change for me to leave active duty, but
very immediately I was assigned to a reserve unit which I stayed with for the better part
of seventeen years, it was the 94th General Hospital, that met here in Mesquite in the very
end of my time I had some other coverage with non-medical units around but I was fully
retired in about 1987, so 72 to 87 I was in the reserve units doing coverage. During this
period I also was mostly associated with hospital ministry, very soon I entered what is
called clinical pass education, CPE. CPE is a learning ministry, while doing ministry,
and most of the CPE centers are in hospitals, though there are some other setting, prisons,
church congregational settings and all, but mainly the vast majority of CPE centers are in
hospitals. It seems that’s that because there’s the concentration of crisis and so you can
do a lot more, kind of a laboratory ministry, if I can use that teem, in the hospital setting.
My hospital assignment was, I did the clinical pastor education at Parks and Memorial
Hospital, which is where President Kennedy died, and I continued there for a number of
years, about until 1995, mostly as the night chaplain. I saw a lot of big time trauma,
violent death, accident death, young people death, you know, sudden breathing and all,
cupping. I certainly found myself, both in the clinical pastor education program itself,
which took about a year and a half, and then the ministry in this setting of the hospital, it
was so focused on trauma here in Dallas, I certainly saw myself beginning to deal with
some of the major human crisis conditions that come, which would lead me then to be
prepared for my enhanced sensitivity towards Vietnam, when 1990 came. The clinical
pastor education was spread the better part of two years, because I had a break in that
training for five-month spoof, Fort Leavenworth, for the commander general staff
college. I count myself very fortunate to have been able to do that on site, rather than by
correspondence and all. I wasn’t a very great student. Those subjects, however, learning,
command and staff relationships is exceedingly important to me because as I think it tells
you in the Church of Christ, our structure is so democratic we almost don’t know what
supervision is, and when we’ve got it and what we should do with it when we have it and
how we fit with collegiality and all of it, and even as I look at this point, ministers in my
church, I kind of shake my head and say, you know, it’d be so much easier if you put
some kind of order, on the calling, but I feel much advanced as far as a person in a
structured context, whether it’s the military or the reserve or the VA, or the Department
of Human Services where I worked for a while. I feel so much better equipped to handle
that, so that was a very valuable experience.

Soon after Commander General Staff and after I finished CP residency at
Parkland, I had a couple years when I was with Child Protective Services, as a foster
home worker. That again, laid the basis for me to understand, or to become aware of
major trauma because of all of these kids were just really mistreated and/or
abandoned/neglected and I began to realize what an epidemic we have in the
undervaluing and mistreatment of children. That population continues to be very much a
focus in my awareness. Now, I don’t work with too many kids these days but I certainly
pay a lot of attention to how that plays out, particularly in our veteran patients, because a
lot of them are not only combat traumatized, but they were traumatized prior to that in the
kind of home life they had. Some people enter the service to escape a dysfunctional
family situation, both men and women, and when they get to combat that’s only
enhanced, the difficulty of coping becomes even more difficult. I’ve kind of talked on,
have I kind of touched on something that needs clarifying?
SM: Well, I was curious about the effects of your Vietnam service on these earlier experiences in the hospital, in the reserve unit, as you started dealing with traumatic death, and grieving and things of that nature. I was curious if there was anything in your Vietnam experience that you were able to incorporate, and kind of use to guide you in those particular experiences.

RC: Well, the way I would say it is that as the time came, I rather gradually processed what the Vietnam experience was about. In other words, it was like this experience was there and waiting to be opened to my awareness and when I was at Child Protective Services, or Parkland Trauma Unit or whatever, that just heightened my awareness of the human suffering that I was going to really pay attention to whenever I had PTSD laid in front of me by my fellow ministers, in that very first meeting of the Vietnam Veteran Ministers Conference in 1990. In other words, it was kind of like the potential had always been there, but only when I heard people, first hand, telling me stories, did it hit me as to what I had been close to and what they had been in the middle of. Of course, many of the ministers in the conference were infantry, intelligence, medics, nurses, before they became ministers in the conference, before they were ordained as ministers, after Vietnam. The eligibility requirement in the conference is that you be both a veteran of the war itself, and then be ordained as a minister at a church, so you had to have both those qualifications, for full membership, there’s an associate membership, for people who are interested but who do not fully qualify.

SM: Was that your first serious introduction to Vietnam veteran PTSD?

RC: You know, Steve, I think that would be fair to say and when I look at that in the light of the conversations we’ve been having, I think how I could have been so blind, but it just has to come to you, but the way I say that to people, I see the veterans up on the ward and what, is to say, God gave me the power to hear and to believe because one of the huge issues of trauma, about the Vietnam war, is that in addition to the horrible things that people experienced in the field of combat or stuffing body bags, or whatever they did, the rejection, the return, which incidentally I didn’t feel, I really have never felt directly, although I suspect certain experiences, but a lot of people don’t know how to take seriously, that trauma is still an ongoing condition with several hundred thousand of our Vietnam veterans. That is just something that they don’t believe, it’s not that they
want not to believe, its just that they can’t take it into themselves, which kind of goes back to why I was so blind to PTSD until I heard these stories, first on. I don’t think I was unique in not being fully acquainted with the magnitude of the problem. I think that many American civilians for little appreciation for what the war was, not only do I fid my ministry focused on those who are veterans of that experience, but to use whatever opportunity I have to raise awareness of people of what psychic trauma amounts to, certainly the combat experience or any other kind, so my ministry has certainly expanded to be more than just to the combat traumatized, but I don’t think a lot of people realize how much some people suffer from whatever trauma that they had.

SM: When you look back for instance on your experiences with child services, and taking care of those abused or neglected or abandoned children, do you recall any of them coming form households that involved Vietnam veterans, who might have been suffering from PTSD?

RC: I’m not sure I ever made that connection, there probably was, or probably is. It’s the other way I see it. I see when I go to the, we’ll say the substance abuse ward, and talk to Vietnam veterans, I frequently find that have had this double trauma from their family life which I kind of referred to earlier. That’s where I found those two things connected.

SM: How much of a person’s background, in your experience now, since PTSD has become more of a focus, more of an aspect of your understanding and your activity, how much of a person’s background prior to their service in Vietnam do you think affects whether or not they might eventually suffer from PTSD?

RC: There have been studies to see if people are more prone for trauma if they have had traumatic pre-service experiences, and I don’t think they build a very strong connection, if that’s been the case. That doesn’t mean that a person who has had a rather normal upbringing, that’s been trauma free, is less traumatized by the combat experience. I run into that periodically, I know one guy who was a hundred percent, he was Mister neighborhood kid, over in Oakcliff, not far from where I live, but he is one hundred PTSD, service connected. I do see that kind of thing, and I always ask, to try to make that clear because if people are to learn to cope effectively, instead of through destructive behaviors, they need to know all of things that they have to get out in front of them from
their life experience, so they can really begin to deal with it. One of the things that I say to substance abuse patients, and so many of our psychiatric patients, not first as PTSD patients, but they come as substance abuse patients, and then they’re determined to be dual diagnosis and the dual diagnosis may be substance abuse plus PTSD, or it may be substance abuse plus bipolar or clinical depression or personality disorder, whatever and not PTSD. It seems like from the things that I am seeing from brain research, that trauma can alter brain chemistry, function, and even brain structure. I’ve joined the international society of traumatic stress studies. I went last November and I heard a lecture by an MD, who really was laying it right there on the line from very careful research. I’ll be going to that conference again in this coming December, and I will certainly be looking for what further thing is to be said about the impact of major trauma on brain function, which back here, as far as the patients are concerned, they have the trauma of war, and rejection on return home, the nightmares and things they need to forge, they cover it with alcohol or drugs, and then brain function may alter in such a way, brain chemistry may change permanently, so the outcomes a bipolar, it seems like there’s some connection from beginning to end or another way its expressed is not so much, a mental illness diagnosis, but then we have these fifty year old guys upstairs, right as we speak, who’ve got heart problems and cancer problems and diabetes problems, that while the correlation seems likely, the cause and effect has not been established in research, but the correlation gets pretty strong. You see that a person who has been carrying trauma unsuccessfully for thirty years would have wither his mind to alter, or his bodies break down. I see these things very vividly. Every day in my ministry, will before this day is over, because I’m at the hospital today, so I just think that its so important for us, at the beginning of the 21st century, to see the possible connection between early childhood or early life hood trauma with later life outcomes, physical or mental. Oh, let me say something else, the people who, like myself were ten, or fifteen, twenty years older than the usual enlisted person who came to Vietnam, for one thing they were, many times officers, or they had had NCOs who had a fair amount of experience. It seems like the seasoning of life goes on through passages, through experiences, of ten or fifteen years of adulthood. Those people seem to have had less difficulty with PTSD then the new recruit. The new recruit, as one of our chaplains in the conference said, are late adolescents who are still forming
their life values and just now beginning to test them, and so much happens in the twenty-
one to thirty-five year old development to help people look at the negative experiences so
that when they come on a person individually, he or she isn’t so overwhelmed by them.
With a lot of our Vietnam veterans, there was just a huge amount of being overwhelmed
with what they saw and don’t misunderstand, I think that older people can be traumatized
too, that’s been told us by our chief psychiatrist here, they told us chaplains that, but the
newness to adulthood is a pretty poor time for people to undergo major trauma. The
work of Jonathan Shay, whom I have spoken of before, and he’s been to our conference a
number of time, and he was at the International Traumatic Stress Studies Conference, and
will be there again this year, his project, of course he feels like we should do what we can
to eliminate war from our global civilizations, but he says that’s not likely to happen just
yet, but he says there’s way to help a person exposed to combat to be less damaged by its
trauma. One of the things, and the major thing, I preached a sermon on this, just last time
I was at the pulpit, it was social betrayal, and in Vietnam that seemed to be particularly
prominent because you feel like you get this new officer in, and he would subject the men
in his command to dangers unnecessarily, and the soldiers were real tuned into that, and
when they felt like someone was being careless, or was taking care of himself at their
expense, this guy was at risk for fragging or friendly fire, whatever, and that was
something that was particularly noticeable in Vietnam era. It may have been that the
anti-war movement kind of helped to help people be more critical of how they were being
handled, not only by the officers in the field, but the politicians in Washington, the policy
makers, wherever because, well let me tell you, last week at the execution of Timothy
McVeigh, it was brought to my attention, this is a terrible thing, and here in Texas, where
you know the death penalty, that’s our big badge, almost, I told people that if justice were
served across the board, there are plenty of Vietnam veterans who would see Jane Fonda
as, if anything, more guilty of being at war with the United States because of her activity
in Vietnam, and the possible cause of the death of many Vietnam service people, simply
because of the position she took when she went to Hanoi. The feeling of Vietnam
veterans against Jane Fonda, in my perception are far stronger, negatively, than against
Timothy McVeigh, for the general population. I don’t know if that, but the disparity in
how social justices is practiced, this big issue with people who served in Vietnam and in
their subsequent lives.

SM: In terms of the veterans you’ve encountered, those who have been
traumatized and that you’ve tried to help through counseling and what not, how important
in most of their lives has religion been?

RC: They have not given up religion, but religion is seen as a real problem
because they associate what they believe, in looking at their own history they see that
they were good kids, as altar boys or Sunday School, they were always doing the right
thing in the youth groups, and that community experience did not stand them in good
stead when they went to the combat field. When they come back, then the religious
groupings are sufficiently connected with the quote ‘establishment’, that these people
really regularly are someplace, they just go it alone, and that’s how I find them, now
sometimes they can decide that somebody in church understands them, or their
experience, so they’ll feel more reconciled, but the majority of these guys, lying up there
in the beds, and the substance abuse wards, the majority of them really do not put
themselves in a faith group membership and activity, and that’s pretty much how I find
them.

SM: In terms of your ministry, your counseling, do you find that trying to
reintroduce them, or re-emphasize religion, do you find people receptive to that as a
mechanism to help them cope with, and perhaps learn from their experiences?

RC: Yes, because otherwise I wouldn’t have any ministry at all. First, there’s a
theological question that I ask, which I say have you sinned more, or have been sinned
against more? Most usually say, people will say, I have sinned more. I think the church,
and the church is the religious groups, is responsible for that, because even, before you
called, I’m reading something about orientation to Christian theology and faith, and the
focus is on the specific believer about whatever sin is in his life and the social setting in
which sin is committed is almost never addressed, and this is across the Christian board
as far as I am concerned. So, I was asked this question, so I said, now wait a minute, you
did things in Vietnam which violated your conscience, right, and I said, they might even
tell me something about this while I was, that may be in the conversation, say, okay. I’d
say would you ever have done that, if you had not been placed on orders, if you’d not
been sent there, if you had not been directed to carry out patriotic duty and this was in the 
line of responsibility. “Oh, no I would never, I never killed anybody, only in that 
setting.” And I said, so you were ordered and the people who put you there, and you had 
to face all this stuff and then come back with nightmares. They did what they did to you 
prior to your ever breaking your own moral code. It seems to me that maybe they sinned 
more than you did. Now you can do that to somebody else, but it seemed like you were a 
set-up to break your moral code, because you were under orders. Then when they begin 
to realize, like the book of Isaiah said, I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst 
of people of unclean lips, in other words there is a social situation that puts you at risk, 
morally and spiritually. That seems kind of gives them a sense of, who, I’m glad I’m not 
in this all by myself, I’m glad that I’ve got some bit more of an explanation. Now, they 
don’t try to justify themselves, that’s not the point. Then I will mover from there to texts 
both in the Old Testament and the New Testament, where the question that I have is the 
Messiah, Old Testament, Jesus, New Testament, I say, was he traumatized. It’s kind of 
funny. One guy just said, oh no, because I think that he kind of felt like this was the 
Sunday School answers, and I said oh, yes he was. I said he was on the cross, but most 
usually they can say quickly, yes, the Messiah was traumatized, or the Jesus I believe in 
was traumatized, not just in his crucifixion but in his rejection and betrayal and all that 
kind of thing. The next thing I say is, you’re in good company, and you talk about people 
getting a sense of relief, and they’re like oh, well, and I must say, Jesus is represented as 
not having committed sin, and I do, but as far as the experience of being traumatized, 
you’re in really pretty good company, and I said in your worship experience, we’ll say 
taking the Lord’s supper, I said, you need to take your trauma and bring it right there, and 
have that as part of your self-examination, when you do your personal devotion at the 
Lord’s table. I make the faith as I understand it, and when I’m talking to people who are 
Christian, of course I talk to other people too, but when I’m dealing with a person whose 
committed to Christian faith, basically, even though they may not go to church, I use faith 
terms to help them cope, and it seems very helpful to them to have that kind of an 
orIENTATION, directed to the faith.

SM: What do you do if the person is not open to Christianity and faith?
RC: Well, what they’re not open to is usually me, or anybody. I walk in, and I might even, if I bring up the issue of Vietnam, “well, I don’t want to talk about it.” I give them permission to be in that space because my guess is that they’re so close to their fear, big cauldron of feeling that if I persisted, they’d dump all over me, or whatever. Nothing good would be accomplished. I give people space if they don’t wish to, I used to articulate that. I said “I don’t have curiosity, you don’t have to talk about this any more if we’re talking and you get to a point where you’ve done all you can tolerate, just tell me so and I’ll excuse myself.” They have told me, you know you get into a conversation that gets to a certain point, say well, I can’t talk any more, and I’ll excuse myself and I don’t take that personally. I think that is just kind of where they’re at it, and they can only go so fast through this very thorny material of their memory.

SM: How much do you work with the psychologist, psychiatrists, that are involved in this process?

RC: That’s a real frustrating point for me. I’ve always been part-time here at the VA, only twenty hours a week and that has always included at least twelve hours on the weekends, so that means only eight hours Monday through Friday. Now, right now I happen to be on a thirty-six hour week, but that’s to cover some pretty glaring blank spaces, in fact that’s why I’m here today, Monday, because for the next five Mondays I’ll be here to cover some rather significant chaplain absences, leave whatever, so that is all to say that I have never been successful being in an interdisciplinarian arrangement with the people that work directly with PTSD patients, or Vietnam veterans. Curiously, Mary Nguyen, who spoke at the symposium in April, the first time I ever met her, well she and I really developed a rather close working relationship, and she is in the Vietnam Veterans of America chapter here, which I have joined as a life member. Over longer time, I’ve known one of our PTSD counselors, a guy named John Weed, and he has actually spoken to chaplains, in didactic session a couple of three times, a wonderful guy, but somehow, his work is just so demanding, and I think all our PTSD counselors are just so caught in their thing, that we just don’t easily interact with them, even in an informal basis, and I told you why. I’m just not available for their interdisciplinary meeting, though I would love very much to be so. My other work here just kind of, and when I pay attention to the Vietnam veterans, that’s because I’m looking for them. When I see someone whose fifty-
five years old, I will likely go and unpack that with them if they’re available. It’s just one of the things that I do, and I’ve done a fair amount to acquaint the other chaplains with my focus on trauma, not that that’s the only way to do ministry, but in this setting I think that it’s just really important that you have some kind of appreciation for what the veteran experience is, one of the things that we have here, throughout the VA, but we have homeless domiciliary program, that Dallas and Bonham and Fort Worth outpatient are combined at VA North Texas healthcare system. There is a longer domiciliary experience in Bonham than there is here, but we have about thirty beds here, and we work together between Bonnom and Dallas to accommodate these homeless people and as the publicity is about a third of homeless people in America are supposedly veterans and I certainly see that our homeless population are veterans and a good percentage of those are Vietnam veterans, though not all. So, I try to make people aware, if I have time, our personal conversations sometimes, in our staff meetings and what have you.

SM: Now, I was curious, of course the history of the United States, twentieth century, we’ve become an increasingly secular nation, and of course, the medical profession reflects that, and I was wondering if, as a result of that, have you ever met resistance amongst the psychiatrists, psychologists, that you’ve worked with, in terms of your approach, in terms of the role of religion, or have they been by and large accepting of that, acknowledging its utility, things like that?

RC: You raise a good question, and I certainly am aware that the scientific method, which is how docs and some other medical professionals are trained, is it kind of takes them away from such as prayer and faith, the particular statements in faith. I’m even very careful in talking with you when I say Jesus or the Old Testament, whatever, because, I don’t want to be seen as somebody who’s just real doctrinaire, but not every minister, and not every chaplain is as attentive to the setting. When you work with people who are probably practical agnostics, if that’s the case, and certainly not all doctors and nurses are doctrine, and other professionals, but a fair amount of them have raised enough questions to where that they don’t just quickly run in and say oh, hi, I love Jesus first thing, but a lot of ministers just don’t appreciate why that would be. They haven’t had the kind of preparation that would sensitize them to non-Christian or non-Judeo-Christian ways of thinking, because your term secularism, its kind of a term of
contempt with more conservative Christians, and to appreciate what that’s about, that’s away from their awareness and that kind of thing, turns up, we’ll say a minister will visit a patient whose doc is a psychiatrist and may have some questions about religious faith or a Christian faith, and this Christian minister will go full speed ahead, go to church, pray, read the Bible and everything will be fine, and that may not be at all helpful, and so when the psychiatrist knows about that, its easy to say, well I guess that’s the way the Christian ministry is done. Well, in lost of cases it is, but it isn’t that way with people who are sensitive to the larger fields of discourse, and I certainly hope to belong in that group. I hope our CPE residents, because we do have a CPE program here, I hope they come to realize that we can’t assume that everybody is in a group in Sunday School in some Protestant Christian church, which we can almost say that. We can say that generally here in the Dallas area, but even here we should be very careful, because there’s a lot of people who don’t fit that model. I think that part of the resistance, the distancing of professionals from what they see in chaplains and ministers is because the image that is sometimes reinforced by people who don’t have much awareness of the variations.

SM: You mentioned earlier in the interview when we were talking about your transition form your civilian life to going into the military, that one of the things that you had to adjust to was the fact that you had to be an officer and a soldier first, and a chaplain and a minister second. I’m curious if, given your experiences now, with PTSD sufferers and having witnessed some of the aftereffects of combat trauma on individuals, has your perspective about war and the military, has it changed very much since your initial experience?

RC: Well, I think I’m a person in process. I don’t know whether that means I’m getting better or getting worse, but I certainly am in a process. I’m not where I was five years ago; I’m not where I was ten years ago or certainly when I was discharged from active duty in 1972, certainly. But I think I told you, early on, that I had struggled with pacifism, both in Abilene Christian and in Harvard Divinity and had decided that pacifism is not a very tenable position, not an available position, given the circumstances, I think that’s kind of what Dr. Shay is saying, he’s opposed to war, but the reality is that we have it and so rather than just completely try to isolate one self’s from it, one says while I’ll be involved in it to the extent that I can, but in a way that will help the warrior
and perhaps cast a longer influence against war, so I don’t mind calling myself a veteran
for peace, quickly adding that doesn’t make me a pacifist, if I were somehow called I’d
go immediately and wouldn’t ever look back, because I just feel like that’s the way it
should be. As I look at the Vietnam War, and by the way, the symposium at Lubbock, I
find people far too accepting of war as kind of, an automatic tool of diplomacy, and when
I see our president, early on flexing muscles, I hope that’s not what I’ve seen, with
George W., however it’s seems like our presidents kind of need to prove something, and
that may be because the kingmaker’s pushing them hard to do that – in the weekend I was
reading about a couple of people who had resigned from the UN, a year or two ago over
the issue of sanctions against Iraq. I knew from just a few weeks after that Desert Strom
was completed in May, that a twelve member team from Harvard went over to Iraq and
they looked at the damage that was there, and they said that a hundred, likely a hundred
thousand or more Iraqi children would die by the time they were six years old, as a result
of the war, well that was back then, and that would by 1990, well I’m talking about the
humanitarian damage that’s been done by the sanctions in Iraq, apparently just mind-
boggling from what these reports are, but the general news media just doesn’t show that,
and that doesn’t mean that diplomacy is the easier, but the Arab world, not just Iraq, but
the Arab world, would tend to really be angry, and to build their anger against the United
States for this unilateral decision to maintain the sanctions. I say the United States,
United States with the UN, and the distance between the U.S. and the UN is a very
frustrating thing. I’m a member of the, not a very active member, but I’m a member of
the United Nations Association chapter here in Dallas, and the United States has just not,
we’ve led with our own self-interest more than we’ve led with the global interest, that’s
available and I think that we need to be more involved in the global thing. I think that the
unwillingness to join the Kyoto thing, and the unwillingness to belong the membership of
the International Criminal Court, those are things that really make me wonder about how
much our legislators, presidents, understand about what’s going on. It seems very
shortsighted in other words, so I’m moving right along as a veteran for peace. I’m
getting more articulate, I’m not on a church payroll, so when I go to my congregation I
can say these things out loud, and if I’m the only one saying them that’s okay, and seven
to one, I’m not winning popularity contests. I’m trying to see as clearly as I can, the best
way to go, but I really don’t think that our people who are done in diplomacy have been very creative. Now, the one diplomatic challenge above all else seems to me is, what goes on between the Israelis and Palestinians and the reason I think that is because at the core of their respective coalitions, there is that God told us that this is our land. Well, he told two different sets of people that there was there land and so since God said it, I personally don’t know how that’s going to ever be resolved. I was talking to somebody about the Kurdestani not having a country, but its really not the same way with the Kurdestani and its with the Palestinians, because God didn’t give the Kurdestani that section in east Turkey or, whatever they generally inhabit, as he gave to Abraham and his descendants, whether they be through Isaac or through Ishmael. That’s a diplomatic thing I just think will, maybe enough secularish will get in there to win it, won’t keep the war going inevitably, but that is because of a very unique and incidentally, a religious basis for war, and religious wars are very, very tragic. I’ve just done some reading recently about church history from Reformation forward and its heartbreaking to realize that whether you genuflect twice or three times you can despise and hate and kill somebody, that’s really kind of startling to me, and painful, but church history is loaded with bellicose spirit, and this kind of thing, polarizing and all that thing, and I think it really goes back to the individual ministers. I had a conversation before you called this morning, about somebody whose child was on the way that he preaches. Right here in our chapel, and it is and I don’t think the person I was talking to realizes how exclusive that the preachment can sound, and if you’re not on the inside, you’re judged, and perhaps even, they get the feeling that they might be condemned as well as judged, if they’re on the outside looking in, and you really have to agree with that kind of preaching to feel good about it at all. Well, I think I’ve told you about in the Church of Christ, in my early life I was aware of some rather blatant kind of things, either you’re a member the Church of Christ, or you can’t be saved, you’re going to hell. I knew how not to say the things in the pulpit that leave people feeling like they’re lost and condemned and focus on that. I think that whether you do that the congregational level, or in the VA pulpit, or whether it’s the way a religious body across the board thinks, it can generate huge conflict. Now, let me say something about the UN, the person specifically was Robert Muller, who was the Assistant Secretary General for many years, and he has
spoken here in Dallas a lot of times I’ve heard him speak. He was telling how that the
UN provided a forum for people very angry to come, blow their stack, and go back home
and business as usual and then come back and blow their stack again and the thing that
Robert Muller said was that the UN had been far too responsible for precluding World
War Three. Now, that’s a pretty interesting analysis but, there are some hopeful things
out there, and with all its difficulties, I think the UN, it may be in second place, but
there’s nothing in first where people can get together and talk across a broad base, but I
think that we need that type of thing, that kind of forum to help us realize that people live
in Nepal are just as much people as those who live in Denver, or in North Texas, and the
difference that people imagine between peoples is being unpacked in out very
technological world, so that we’re having to bump up against people we just had a vague
notion of who they were, and thought they were very different and threatening, so I think
there are some opportunities for diplomacy to be much more creative, and that kind of
thing, and I think it’s a rather slow process, we take one step forward and two back
sometimes, so I’m not unhopeful. I hope that the twenty-first century, we don’t see the
killings of millions of people, like we did in the twentieth, one of the bloodiest centuries
of all history, and sometimes its hard for me to see that, see you get [?] in our memory
and people in the value setting places, whether its in the legislature or in the churches,
how they can just pass over that, and just say well, let’s continue on. I’m hopeful,
because I think that there are a lot of people who don’t want to see the planet destroyed
and the people in it.

SM: Well, what do you think about today, deploying U.S. forces in a capacity
similar to what happened in the 1960s and 70s in Vietnam? Do you think we should do
that type of activity, that is send forces to protect and prevent aggression by third parties
whether they be internal or external?

RC: Well, I ‘m real hesitant for us to, we’ll say Columbia, that’s kind of the
present thing, we really need to know how it is to be in Columbia and a lot of times our
policymakers don’t, they’re not fully briefed, one thing, what percentage of the farmers in
Columbia survive because of poppy, illegal growth and the harvesting of poppies? That
doesn’t mean that's what we want, it means that that’s the way these people live, and you
don’t just categorically go to war against those people and solve a problem because after
the war’s over, those who don’t die still have to eat and for people to come in a
paternalistic way and say well, we know best, and if you don’t our way, well we’ll fix
you, we’ll wipe you out. That’s quick and dirty I realize, but that mentality isn’t very
helpful. In a minute, I want to tell you about my Saturday night activity, but its kind of
related to that, so I’m pretty conservative on how quickly we should mobilize in a
particular area. I think its fine to be a part of the UN conversation, I think we need to be
in that, I think a lot of people need to do that. I think that when we find ourselves on the
outside looking in on some things that UN does, I think we need to examine, how do we
get back in a meaningful conversation, because on some of these issues, I don’t think
we’re in a conversation with these people, but I’m very conservative about sending troops
anywhere, because I just think that its been sometimes a short circuit to more responsible
diplomacy.

SM: What do you think we should take away collectively, from our Vietnam
experience?

RC: Well, with a focus on history and I guess I told you that Harvard Divinity
was a history-focused, religion focused thing, rather than so much on theology focused,
but, it saddens me to realize that from the 1860s, there were several, at least three times
when we were approached in the hundred years from the 60s forward to be of some kind
of economic support, maybe mediation support and we just turned our back, Woodrow
Wilson was one of those people, and I think Ho Chi Minh gave us an opportunity, and
people have demonized him terribly, but for all that, he was Mr. Vietnam. I don’t think
I’m exaggerated that, and even people in Vietnam who didn’t agree with him, somehow
he was Mr. Vietnam, and he was Mr. Vietnam before he was anybody’s Communist,
there were opportunities that the west could have been in meaningful conversations with
him, so the tension could have produced more light than heat. We just have to honor the
dignity of people, in being the richest nation, the biggest consumer nation in the world, its
really kind of hard for us to see to take on international modesty, or to present ourselves
with modesty in an international arena, and one of our staff members here happens to be
from Vietnam, and he was over there for a month, and I saw him Saturday here in the
hall, and he said they’re making some effort to improve economically. Well, I know that
from what I hear in Lubbock, and I know it from, not many quite detail but I know
something is happening. The very fact that he can go back and not feel that his is under
any particular risk, there’s a lot of interchange that way, between the Vietnam population
here and elsewhere, going back and visiting home, so I know that that's happening, but
the disparity between those very poor people and us who, at least the middle class s of us
and higher, are rich people, puts us at a conversational disadvantage, but I don’t think that
we should avoid the conversation, when it is difficult, the disparity, the economic
disparity should simply say that we’ve to got try harder to understand and to, which in the
long run will probably require that there be some economic adjustment somehow,
globally to help the poor nations of the world who, kind of, enter a fuller status of the
community of nations. Now, how that happens, I certainly want to see it at my level, and
I want to see it in the history departments, like Texas Tech, I want to see it in pulpits, and
I want to see it in the halls of the legislatures, Congress and the presidency, and when we
have a chance go get outside through the, we’ll say the UNA, incidentally, the UNA
project right now, the removal of land mines, well that certainly is an international issue
if I ever saw one. I think that we just need to be in an improved quality of conversation
so we can, somebody else might have another point of view, which is a real important
point of view, and I would hope the twenty-first century is a conversation century.

SM: Well, is there anything else you’d like to talk about today?

RC: Well, I was going to tell you about Saturday night. A friend of mine invited
me to this banquet thing sponsored by the, I guess it’s a Park City, that’s a part of Dallas,
the rich part of Dallas, Park City’s Retired Officer’s Association, so it was a bunch of
military people, and their presenter was to be talking about a vet to vet program here in
the VA sponsored by this Rotarian, using the Rotary Club up there to help get this over.
Well, I’d never heard of that vet to vet program, so I was glad to hear about it, and
specifically what he said, he says that he and his Rotarian volunteers, and anyone else
that wants to come, come out here and they help these people play Bingo, and he
specifically mentioned our transitional care unit, which is a nursing home, and then our
spinal cord injury unit, which people need lots of help, because many times they can’t
even move their arms, but to play Bingo they have to have that. Anyway, that’s what he
was telling about. I thought, well that was interesting, I said I don’t know why it’s been
going on, it’s been going on for quite some time, because I could tell from one of the
guys they called, who was here several years ago, so apparently, so I said, well I wonder why I didn’t know about that. Well, now I know about it, but the climate of the banquet is what I want to talk about. Even in this vet to vet program, the climate is okay, now we are officers, we’ve always been in charge, and we still are in charge kind of people, we’re top down, one of them who was a rifle company commander in Vietnam, an now a minister, he styles himself as a chaplain, he wasn’t on chaplain activity, was at the table, and so he was telling about this one friend of his who, just a real neat guy he said, but he’s got an alcoholic problem. He said, I just wish he could get on with his life, and I, you’d need to know more about what really happened, then what really happens and what continues to go on, but the top down attitude really, I think, interferes with ministry, and I think it interferes with diplomacy. Even though my experiences may have put me way ahead of some other people in the amount of experiences or maybe even the quality of experiences, I’m not better than anybody else, and certainly not any of my veteran patients, high school dropouts, been to prison, whatever, I’m not better than those people. I’m just at a different place and I suspect that’s one of the things that I have come away from the military and saying, it isn’t top down in the final analysis, and I may play the game of being an officer, or being a person with a GS-12 rating, or whatever, but in ministry or in diplomacy, the top down thing is not very useful. It interferes with what needs to happen, and I felt myself, well when I was introduced as a first time visitor at this banquet the other night, nobody came up to me and asked me about the vets. Hey, where are y’all. And some of these were Vietnam veterans themselves, but they were those people who were REMFs, rear echelon motherfuckers, you know that term?

SM: Oh, yes sir, just never heard a chaplain use it before.

RC: You hear that this chaplain, but I don’t need to do that very often, but I don’t think the REMF mentality is helpful in diplomacy or in ministry, it’s interesting, I almost could use that as a sermon. I’ll probably avoid that one though. But anyway, that’s probably; if you need a kind of summary statement, to where I’m at today, I just don’t think top down is it. I was talking to a graduate student in Ethics over at Perkins Seminary recently, who has since gone to the faculty of Abilene Christian University, in Aquino, so we were having lunch together one day, and he looked at me and said, now how would you want to be an ethical person, and I said okay, Fred, as an ethical person I
would like to look at a child, a girl child perhaps, a minority girl child, and consider her one hundred percent equal to me, and I guess that’s where I come, I think the voiceless people out there need voice, and Tony Morrison, who wrote Beloved, which I think is perhaps one of the major novels of our time or maybe even the century, she succeeded in a way of giving a one year old child voice, and I certainly champion her efforts to do that, I think the women are way too often without voice, I think that certainly the vast majority of our suffering enlisted VA veterans are without voice, and the kind of things that they could say, they don’t have words for, that may be one reason I enjoy my work so much is that I’m busy trying to give them voice, for themselves and for community membership. That’s kind of who I am, I hope I continue to grow, but I’m pretty happy with where I’m at at the present time.

SM: Is there anything else you’d like to talk about today?
RC: I think that’s about it.
SM: Okay, well let me put an official ending on this. Thank you very much. This will end the interview with Chaplain Russel Carver.