Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. I’m beginning an oral history interview with U.S. Army Cpt. Roy Riddle. Today’s date is the fifth of February 2004. I’m in the interview room of the Special Collections building on the campus of Texas Tech in Lubbock, Texas. Captain Riddle is in Tahoka, Texas. Is that right, sir?

Roy Riddle: That’s correct.

LC: Good morning. How are you?

RR: Good morning. How are you doing today?

LC: I’m very well. Thank you, sir. I want to ask you first of all just general biographical information, sir. Where were you born and when?

RR: I was born Italy, Ellis County, Texas the eighteenth day of October of 1935.

LC: Can you tell me a little bit about your family? Did you have brothers and sisters?

RR: I have six sisters and one brother. I was the oldest of the eight. The youngest is twenty-one years younger than I am. We were kind of a migrant farm family up until moving to Tahoka right at the end of the 1940s. I think we moved here ’48, I think.

LC: Tell me a little bit about your dad. What did he do and where was he from?

RR: He was from Ellis County, Texas. He was born there. He graduated from high school there. Went to business school in Dallas and was manager of a Safeway Store when he and my mother first married, but he was one of these people that did not like the inside. The desire to farm, I guess, was stronger than the desire to make money.
LC: Has his family been in farming then?
RR: Yes. They farmed in Ellis County, along the Chambers Creek area in Ellis County, Texas.
LC: How long had your father’s family been in Texas?
RR: They came to Texas at the turn of the century from Tullahoma, Tennessee. In fact my grandmother and my granddad met at the Mississippi River when they were waiting on the rivers to go down so the ferry could get them across the river. Her daddy told her to stay away from those Riddle boys, but she ended up marrying one of them.
LC: Did the Riddle boys, had they gotten a little bit of a reputation there?
RR: I think they had a little bit of a reputation along the river. Typical boys I think.
LC: Sure, of course. That’s an interesting story. Do you know why they decided to come out to Texas?
RR: The stories about the abundance of land that was available out here. Like many others they were just little small farms. I have visited the area they came in up there. There’s just a little terrace areas in the mountains of Tennessee and a piece of an acre here and a piece of an acre there. It wasn’t really conducive to making a living. So there was a group of them that decided to come west to Texas where there was abundant land.
LC: What about your mother? What was her maiden name?
RR: Her maiden name was Crumpton.
LC: How do you spell that?
RR: C-R-U-M-P-T-O-N. Her dad was a farmer in Ellis County also. He lost all of his holdings when the markets fell in the late ‘20s early ‘30s during the Depression. From what I understand from the family I’ve talked to, he was quite a successful farmer until then but had invested heavily in a bank and some other financial institutions that all went under during that Depression era.
LC: Yes, sir. You were born at the height of the Depression really, 1935.
RR: That’s correct.
LC: What was your father doing at the time you were born? Was he at the store?
RR: No. At the time I was born he was working for a rancher between Italy and Maypearl. He was a combination, cattle ranching farm. Mostly cattle ranch on a rocky hillside. In fact in recent years, well not recent years, in the ‘70s I visited the back of the farm and the little cabin where I was born.

LC: Oh, really? Is it still there?

RR: It’s still there. Not much to it, but it’s still there. The corrals and things were still there.

LC: Is it being used now?

RR: It’s still being used. It’s been sold to another family, but it still has cattle on it.

LC: Now I would guess that your mother who had eight kids probably stayed pretty close to home and took care of y’all. Is that right?

RR: Until everybody was up and gone and then she operated a cafeteria here in Tahoka, Tahoka Cafeteria. She operated it for the owner for a number of years and he walked in one day and asked her if she had a dollar. She handed him a dollar, thought he needed it for something and he said, “You just bought the cafeteria.”

LC: Oh, you’re kidding.

RR: He was retiring because of health. His daughter didn’t want it. She was an only child and she had told him to let mother have it. To make it a business deal, a business arrangement that would stand in court that he sold it to her for the dollar.

LC: That was a pretty big deal huh?

RR: Yeah, it was a big deal.

LC: All of a sudden your mom is a business owner.

RR: A business owner. She sold it in ’77, I think, ’76 or ’77. Her health was getting down and the town gets smaller as time goes on. Really it reached a point. It needed a lot of repairs done and it wasn’t a good financial plan to go any further with it.

LC: Was she quite proud of that work though, that she did?

RR: Yes she was definitely proud. People came all over to buy food there for workers out in the field and things during harvest season. They would come buy meals from her to take to the fields. The T-Bar Ranch during their round up and things would buy and feed their hands.
LC: So she was kind of providing, she was like the source.
RR: She was the source of food to feed the workers, the migrant workers in this area.
LC: That’s very interesting. She sounds like an interesting lady.
RR: She was. She passed away—well, it’ll be a year ago the twenty-sixth of this month.
LC: So she lived a good long life.
RR: Yes, she did.
LC: That’s wonderful. What about your father now? Had he ever had any military service at all?
RR: He was called up for the draft during World War II. They sent him back home because of the number of kids he had. What they did, they suggested that him and the ones that he knew that weren’t eligible for the service that they go to Beaumont and help build ships. This was actually suggested to them at the Selective Services People. So they went to Beaumont for about a year and a half and constructed victory ships, him and my granddad and uncle.
LC: Now what did he actually do in the shipyard? Do you know?
RR: He cut out the metal plates that they welded together. He actually cut the plates to the size for welding to build the ships.
LC: So he went to Beaumont and your mom stayed home—?
RR: No, we all went there. Everybody went down there. They put up this housing area, this maritime village. It looked just like an Army post, the old wooden barracks and things. Only they had them divided into apartments upstairs and downstairs. If you were lucky they had a few single story units and they relocated the families into those.
LC: Now, Roy, do you have memory of living over there?
RR: Oh, yeah. I remember living there. Meat was really scarce then during the war. We used to go out in the bayous there and catch crawdads and fish and stuff like this to help put on the table, even as kids.
LC: Do you remember things like collecting tin or metal or anything like that that kids used to do during the war?
RR: Yeah. Any pieces of scrap iron you could get a hold of. It didn’t take much
to go earn a quarter, half a dollar of a dollar during those periods of times. It was a good
way to get some spending money.

LC: When you went over to the bayou to go fishing and so forth, who did you go
with, friends from the group?

RR: Just friends from the village there. It was just like a typical Army post. There
was just hundreds of kids all over. Different ones that lived in the housing areas kind of
ganged together and we’d go off and go crawdad fishing and fishing for—we would get
small perch and catfish in those bayous.

LC: Then I presume your mom would cook them up.

RR: They’d cook them. The men would go down on the weekends, they would
go down to the coast at Galveston and actually (inaudible) for shrimp. We ate shrimp till
the family didn’t want shrimp for a number of years, but it beat no meat at all. It was
during the ration period of the war.

LC: Now, Roy, did you have brothers and sisters that were close to you in age?

RR: My sister that’s just younger than me, there’s not quite two years difference
in our age. Then the brother that’s—there’s four years difference in our age.

LC: So would you say that they were sort of your pals during this time?

RR: Oh, yeah, we all hung out together during this time.

LC: When did you actually move out of the shipyard?

RR: We moved back to West Texas in 1944. It was just right before ’45. It was
the end of ’44, just right before the end of the war when we moved back. They were
reducing the number of workers in the shipyards that were building the victory ships, you
know, the U boat problems in the Atlantic had kind of been resolved. They weren’t losing
them as fast. They started reducing the number of workers and we moved back out here
at that time.

LC: Now what was your schooling like? What were you attending at this time?

RR: I was in first and second grade when we were at Beaumont. I guess I was
still in the first grade when we moved down there and then in the second grade we moved
back out here.
LC: Did you begin to work as a kid also in addition to going to school when
you’re back in West Texas?
RR: Once we got back out to the May Ranch, it’s where we went when we first
moved back out here, which no longer exists.
LC: The Main Ranch?
RR: May, M-A-Y. It’s in Wilson, Texas. It’s now also been all sold off as
farmland. When Mr. May died, the kids sold it off. Most of it’s been put into—the
Tahoka Lake area, it’s the only part of it that’s not in cultivation. We had chores there to
do. The one I remember the most is we had to milk in the mornings and then we got on
the school bus still smelling like milk and the other kids made fun of us, but that’s the life
of kids on the farm.
LC: Right, you were working. There is not a lot you could do.
RR: Mr. May, when he paid the other hands, he would always give us kids a little
money, a couple of bucks, but it was like a fortune at that age.
LC: Oh, absolutely. Where were you attending school? Did you go to school in
Tahoka?
RR: No. At that time I was going to Wilson. Then when we moved from the
ranch, we moved to Draw, just D-R-A-W. It’s about eight miles southeast of Tahoka.
Went to school at Draw through the fourth grade. They had a two-room classroom. First
and second grade was in one room and third and fourth was in the other. Then we went to
O’Donnell through the sixth grade. We moved to Tahoka, I was in the seventh grade.
LC: Now is your father finding different work at this—?
RR: He went from the May Ranch to working for a Mr. Williams at Draw
Farming. Then when left Draw and we came to Tahoka he went to work for, initially, for
the Mobile Oil Distributor here in town. It had a service station and they distributed gas
and lubricants to the farms in this area. Then he went from there to John Wit Butane and
then to the Farmers Co-op.
LC: All that’s within Tahoka?
RR: All in Tahoka, yes. They never did leave Tahoka once we moved into town.
I guess it had to have been ’47. I kept saying ’47, ’48. It probably had to be ’47 because I
think I started school here that year.
LC: How much school did you complete while you were living there?
RR: Through the tenth grade.
LC: You were working also a number of jobs yourself as you got older. Is that right?
RR: Yeah.
LC: Can you tell us about some of those?
RR: I worked at the Lynn County News, the newspaper office here. Started out as a mailer, which all you did was print the mailing addresses on all the papers you had fed them into the machine and printed them. I went from there, the mailer, to the job press, running the job press, printing business cards and light bills, things of that nature. Then to the folder, which actually cut the paper and folded it for distribution. I ran the press.
LC: You were getting quite a number of skills then around—
RR: As I learned the different skills, Mr. Hill who owned the paper, he didn’t hold you back if you wanted to learn and learn the business. He allowed you to do it.
LC: Did you think you might want to go into business there in Tahoka, or did you think you wanted to get out?
RR: I don’t think I ever thought about it. I’ll be honest with you. It was just a means of making spending money. Enough to know I could buy shirts and pants and have a little money to spend. I had worked some with the Piggly Wiggly store helping stock and sack there. I had worked at helping a contractor who’s a—he laid tile in bathrooms and things like this. When I wasn’t doing something else, if he needed somebody he would always ask me if I wanted to go help him. Whatever was available, Bert Dollings he hauled feed for the ranch around here. If he needed somebody to help haul hay or feed and I wasn’t busy I would go with him.
LC: You had a lot of stuff that you were doing.
RR: It was one of those things whatever to make a little money.
LC: Yes, sir. Now, sir, when did you start consider the military as something you might go into?
RR: In 1953, I guess it was. There was a drought just like this past year in West Texas. There were not any jobs. Rhett Kimbrell, who had the Piggly Wiggly, he came and told me, he said, “Roy, I’m going to have to let you go.” He said, “I’ve got some men
that need food for their family and I’m going to have to let some of them work because I
just can’t give it to them.” He let three of us kids go at the same time. There was just
nothing left around. The feed man I had been helping, he was using adults because
everybody was looking for work.

LC: Sure, right. Some of those employers felt that they ought to, just as a matter
of rights, let adults with families—
RR: Right with families. I understand that. I had gone to Lubbock and checked
around up there and they’d say, “What’s your selective service?” I said, “Well, I’m not
eighteen yet. I’ll be eighteen in October.” Right then Korea—it was right at the closing
down of Korea and the drought was going on. Even those that had positions weren’t
willing to hire anybody that hadn’t served their military time.

LC: Might have to go away.
RR: So I went to work. We were laying towers—before satellites they had relay
towers for relay television signals. They were running relay towers south of Lubbock, to
Lamesa. We were out digging twenty foot holes that’s in solid rock trying to put that—
and I said there has got to be something else in this world to do.

LC: What were you using to dig those holes? Don’t tell me a shovel.
RR: Picks, those bars, black bars to break it up, break up the rocks.
LC: That’s heavy, hard work.
RR: So, I went to work with Roy Oar, who’s a farmer east of town. I’m out there
in the back of a cotton trailer, shoveling cotton to the back and packing it in and winds
out of the northwest at about forty miles an hour. It’s about thirty degrees. I said, no this
has got to stop. I went to Lubbock and I talked to them about joining the Army.

LC: Now who did you go and see sir?
RR: I went and saw the recruiting office.
LC: Where was that recruiting office in Lubbock?
RR: At that time it was on 19th Street.
LC: Do you remember that encounter, sir, going in there and talking to them?
RR: I can remember it, but I don’t remember the building they were in. I’ve tried
to place it before. I don’t think it’s there anymore.
LC: That very well could be.
RR: The Selective Service and the Army and the recruiting were all together. The Navy recruiting was over by the campus at Tech.

LC: Oh, really.

RR: They had a Navy Reserve Unit, ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corps) unit there. It was somewhere very near where the stadium is now. Anyhow, my first place I went to was the Navy. They told me that they had at least a six-month waiting period.

LC: Now why did you go to the Navy first?

RR: Well, somebody here in Tahoka told me that I could get better training in the Navy and that was all. All of my relatives I know after that point had served in the Army except one and she was in the Air Force.

LC: Now, sir, it would be of great interest to know who those relatives were and particularly the women. Who was that?

RR: She was Helen Riddle. She was in the Air Force, back when they called them the WAVES (Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Service). Was it WAVES or WAF (Women in the Air Force)? WAVES were Navy. WAF was the Air Force. She was at Seattle, Tacoma, at the air base there.

LC: At Sea-Tac, yes, sir.

RR: That earthquake they had in 1947, I think. She was killed in that earthquake.

LC: Really? Was she on duty at that point?

RR: She was still on active duty when it happened. Somewhere I have a photo of her when she was still in the service.

LC: How was she related to you, sir?

RR: She would have been a second cousin. Her dad and my granddad were brothers. I have an uncle on my mothers’ side that he served in the Army. He was in the Pacific. My mother’s sister, her husband was in the Army and he served in the Pacific.

LC: Did you grow up kind of hearing stories about some of what these relatives of yours had done in military service?

RR: Well, I heard about it from my great, great, great, great uncle, how he ended up in the Civil War.

LC: Oh, you want to go ahead and tell us that? That’s very interesting.

RR: Yes. They were—
LC: I take it he was in the south.
RR: They were in Tennessee. They were moving from Tullahoma to—of course that had to be before, but anyhow Uncle Charlie. They were getting ready to set down and eat Sunday dinner and he pulled the chair out from under my grandmother as she started, his mother, as she started to sit down. She plopped in the floor and his daddy sent him off to war from pulling the chair out from under her.
LC: I guess he wouldn’t be doing that again.
RR: He got shot in the arm around Chattanooga, somewhere in that area.
LC: How long was he in the service there in the Civil War?
RR: About a year and seven months.
LC: Have you done any research on him at all?
RR: A little bit. I’ve got a little bit of history on him. There was one that served with the Virginia Volunteers. He served with a mortar unit with the Virginia Volunteers.
LC: Do you know anything about his service or how he was related?
RR: It was just a very distant, but it was still in the Riddle clan. Apparently after the Civil War part of the family had been—part of them had been in Tennessee and part of it in Virginia and after the Civil War that group in Virginia had moved into the Carolinas. They were the Stokes, the Riddles and the Hartongs that were all intermarried in that area. You have to start tracing all three routes when you get there.
LC: Is that something that you have enjoyed doing?
RR: Oh, yeah. I’ve been trying to learn what I could and try to get it recorded so that it would be available to the next generation coming on.
LC: Yes, sir. Let’s go back to your time in high school. Now you had decided to sort of get a job somewhere and it looked like the military might be the best option.
RR: Right.
LC: Is that accurate? So you came up to Lubbock and the Navy recruiter told you that there was a long wait.
RR: Yeah. He said it was at least six months.
LC: What was your reaction to that?
RR: I said, “Well, I want to do something now.” I had gone to the Army recruiter and this lieutenant probably did me a big favor. He says, “How do you know you’re
going to like the Army?” I said, “Well, I don’t guess I will know until I go in and try it.”
He said, “Well, why don’t you go across the street or next door?” I can’t remember if it
was across the street or next door, but it ended up that the Selective Service was right
there. He said, “Why don’t you go over and volunteer for the draft?” He says, “You’ll
get on active duty faster that way than you will if you go through me,” because I
explained to him I needed a job. He says, “They’ll draft you right away.” So I went in
and volunteered for the draft.

LC: That was fairly unusual, right? Not a lot of guys were doing that.
RR: Right. No. They thought I was kind of crazy. There were two of us that
went.

LC: Now who was that pal of yours who went with you?
RR: He was Courtney Taylor from—he wasn’t actually from Tahoka. He was
from, oh, north of Amarillo. I can’t even remember now. He’s up near Lake Meredith.
Anyhow he lived up in that area. We had met in Lubbock when I was trying to get in the
service. I think we actually met at the naval office and then we had gone to that Army
recruiter at the same time and then going into volunteer at the same time.

LC: So you both kind of hooked up and did the same thing.
RR: Did the same thing and we actually stayed together until I went to Europe in
1955.

LC: Where did he go?
RR: He was still at Ft. Lee, Virginia, when I left there and that was the last I
heard of him.

LC: Oh, okay. You didn’t keep up with him at all?
RR: No.

LC: So you volunteered for the draft. What happened right after that?
RR: I got a letter from my friends and neighbors had selected me and I went to
Amarillo for a physical. It was accepted. They took my test there and I went from there to
Ft. Bliss, Texas.

LC: About how much time would you say elapsed between you’re going up to
Amarillo to have your physical and the time you reported at Ft. Bliss?
RR: Overnight.
LC: Not much, huh?
RR: I went to Amarillo on the twenty-seventh. I was sworn in on the twenty-eighth and I arrived in El Paso on the twenty-ninth.
LC: Twenty-ninth of—
RR: April, 1954.
LC: Tell me about arriving in Ft. Bliss. What were your first impressions there?
RR: What did I get myself into? There to get a bunk you had to draw it out of the supply room and carry it to the barracks. Everybody seemed when you first got there, you got on the second floor so you had to carry these mattresses and bunks and all this stuff up to the second floor and set them up. Everybody was hollering and yelling. It was quite an experience, an awakening.
LC: Were there a lot of guys coming in at the same time as you?
RR: Yeah. There was 130 of us were brought in there over a 72 hour period into that one unit and then processed. Then once we were processed we were moved to Logan’s Heights and started our basic.
LC: The basic lasted how long?
RR: Eight weeks.
LC: That was all at Ft. Bliss I take it.
RR: Yeah.
LC: Do you remember the routine in basic? Can you describe what you had to do?
RR: Well, it was PT (physical training) every morning when you first got up. Then breakfast and then it was drill ceremonies until lunch and usually after lunch were classes. They would wait until you were sleepy and then they’d start the indoor classes. So everybody got—I don’t know—the Army always did that, I don’t know why. After you got to a certain point you started working with the weapons. You would work at the PRI (preliminary rifle instruction) circle. This is where you just practiced your aiming and firing. Then we moved on to the ranges and fired the different weapons and different grenades.
LC: What weapons were you using? Do you remember?
RR: We were using the M-1 rifle and the M-60 machine gun. The carbine was there. We had familiarization with the carbine, but we qualified with the M-1.

LC: You did qualify then at this point?
RR: Yes.

LC: Was shooting something that you already knew a little bit about?
RR: A little bit but not that much. Really I had never fired that high powered of a rifle before. It was something to getting used to. The field striping, cleaning, putting it back together again, and then we started the short bivouac. We did a short bivouac like an overnight and then, I guess, on the seventh we went out for a full week in the field that had a little aggressor activity and the different things going on.

LC: Do you remember your instructors at that time?
RR: I remember one of them.
LC: Okay. Tell me what you remember about him.
RR: He was a black corporal. He had a scar that run from ear to ear. He told us all the way through that he got that because he was not proficient in hand to hand combat, that if he had been as proficient as he should have been he would have overpowered the Chinese that did it to him. He impressed on us, if nothing else, to learn hand-to-hand combat. He says when it gets down to the last few inches, the gun don’t do you any good. He said it’s what’s you can do with your body.

LC: Did you know where he sustained that injury or where he had been deployed?
RR: In Korea, at the Heart Break Bridge, in Korea.
LC: Did he tell you about his experiences up there besides that?
RR: Yes, he told us about it. He told us about it more than once. Every time somebody was slacking up and saying I can’t do it or something like this, he would say, “Do you want to end up like this?” He said, “You can finish basic without being proficient in hand to hand combat,” but he says, “Do you want to end up like I did?”
LC: He sounds tough.
RR: He was tough but you need somebody to be tough sometimes.
LC: Yes, sir.
RR: There comes a time you just need somebody to be tough.
LC: Now you said he was an African American man?
RR: Yes.
LC: Had you known many black people before you went—?
RR: All my life. On the ranch there was black families and Hispanic and white all out there together in Beaumont living in the village, all living together.
LC: So you didn’t have any problem?
RR: I didn’t have a problem. I was around people—once I got into Tahoka I was around people who had problems, but myself I never had a problem.
LC: Were there other guys maybe in the unit who had an issue with him?
RR: Oh, there was lots of people who had issues with it.
LC: Can you describe some of that?
RR: Well, they were just all talking about what they were having to do, take orders from niggers, why is this all going on? “My daddy won’t ever let me take orders from a nigger,” but they had no choice. They had to or get out.
LC: That’s right. Did that bother you when people would say stuff like that or was it just kind of—?
RR: It bothered—even today it bothered me. It bothers me when the black people refer to themselves as niggers.
LC: Yeah, because of what it used to mean.
RR: Yeah, what it used to mean.
LC: Were most of the instructors do you think Korean War veterans that you had there?
RR: All of them we had were Korean War veterans. Now in some of the units I understand they weren’t. They looked under it. We had this company commander who had just come back from Korea. The first sergeant had just come back from Korea. The sergeant, my platoon sergeant, and the one that was teaching hand to hand combat, he had just come back. He had just come out of the hospital from being in Korea.
LC: Really? Wow. What had he been hospitalized for do you know, Roy?
RR: He was the one that had the scar on his head.
LC: He sounds like an interesting man. Do you recall his name?
RR: No, I don’t. I wish I could. I think I have a photo of that unit and he’s in the photo.

LC: Really? Okay. Sir, how did you do with the military discipline? Some guys have told us when they first go to basic they have a problem with it. Did you do all right?

RR: I was told—my advice, and this advice came from one of the people in Amarillo where we took our physical and everything. He said, “Just let it go in this ear and out the other one. Don’t take anything seriously or personally.” He said, “Be serious about it, but don’t take it personally. Just let it go in one ear and out the other.” I just approached from the standpoint if they’re not talking to me, they’re talking to somebody else.

LC: That was probably a good strategy actually. You soon moved onto advanced training and you went to Virginia, is that right?

RR: I went to Fort Lee, Virginia, for advanced training.

LC: When did you get those orders?

RR: We got them in our last week of basic. There was a big mix up. They had me scheduled to go to OCS (officer candidate school). Then when I went in for the interview he said, “You can’t go to officer’s candidate school. You don’t have a high school education.” I said, “Well, I didn’t ask for it. This is just the orders I got.” They changed me at the last minute to go to Fort Lee to equipment repair course there.

LC: So that wasn’t something you selected?

RR: No. It was just given.

LC: It was the equipment—

RR: General equipment repair. What it is, you did the engines, clutches, transmissions, electrical motors, electrical generators, welding, electricity, wiring, electrical wiring. It was a total general repair course.

LC: Yeah and did you like it?

RR: Oh, I enjoyed it. I learned a lot in the course.

LC: Yeah I bet and very useful things too.

RR: And very useful. It was useful throughout my career and it’s still useful today. Then at the end of the course they selected the top group from the class to go to the repair part supply course.
LC: Did that include you then?

RR: Yes. We immediately went to repair part supply, which provided me with good extra duty assignments throughout my Army career, the knowledge I gained there.

LC: Okay. How long were you actually at Fort Lee then?

RR: We were at Fort Lee about twenty-six, twenty-eight weeks, maybe a little longer than that.

LC: That includes both the general equipment repair?

RR: Yeah. I guess it’d be longer than that because one of them was a twenty-week course and the other one was an eight-week course. Then I went to the thirty-six quarter master demonstration battalion when I finished repair part supply. I was only there a very short period of time before I went to Europe.

LC: About how long were you with the quarter master battalion?

RR: I think two months, three months. It was a real short period of time. It was long enough to get my GED (general equivalency diploma). I went in and this lieutenant, he was looking over my records and everything. He said, “The first thing I want you to do is go take your GED.” So he set up the appointments and within a week I took my GED. At that time the Army had a college level GED. When I got the results back on my high school he had me go take the college level GED.

LC: Would that be for college preparatory material?

RR: The Army, it’s just like the CLEP (college level examination program) test you take, you can test out of English and things. The Army, if you score sixty-five percent or better they gave you credit for one semester or thirty hours of college work from it.

LC: Wow. So you nailed that?

RR: I nailed it and that’s what got me started on my college work. He’s responsible. He got me in that direction.

LC: Well, that was a very good piece of advice and direction from him.

RR: He says, “It says here that you were selected for OCS, but you couldn’t go because you didn’t have a high school education.” I said, “That’s right.” He says, “Get it.” He pushed. There’s times you need somebody to push.

LC: Do you remember him, his name?
RR: Now I keep wanting to say it was Bowers, but I don’t think that’s right because I worked for a general and colonel that was Bowers. I don’t think it was the same person. It could have been.

LC: In any event someone sort of stepped in and said this is what you need to do.

RR: Yeah. But he was good with everybody that came in, trying to push them in positive direction with their life.

LC: What was your—before I ask you about going over seas, what were your parents thinking about the decision that you had made to enter the military?

RR: Before I went up and volunteered in the draft, I had tried to get my dad to sign for me to go. He said, “When you’re eighteen you can sign and do what you want to do, but I’m not going to be responsibly for letting you go in before you’re eighteen.” When I went in he just said, “Are you sure that’s what you want to do?” I said, “Yes, sir, I’m sure.” I said, “I don’t want to be out here working for some farmer the rest of my life.” I said, “I can still remember how cold and how miserable it was in that cotton trailer.” He said, “If you’re sure that’s what you want to do.”

LC: What about your mom?

RR: Huh?

LC: What about your mother?

RR: She just told me it was my life. I had to make my decisions. They were supportive.

LC: Yeah, generally they were supportive.

RR: It was just they weren’t supporting me going in before I was eighteen.

LC: Right, okay, but afterwards then it seemed like not a bad idea. Did you have a bit of time off before you went overseas before you took up that assignment?

RR: We were given I think twenty days delay en route.

LC: What did you do?

RR: I came to Tahoka and visited my family and then went to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey.

LC: How did you get up there?

RR: I flew in to Newark—

LC: Newark Airport.
RR: Yeah, airport, but in those days you didn’t get there from here. You had to go to Dallas to Memphis to somewhere else, I don’t know. It took forever.

LC: Now, sir, would that have been the first time that you ever flew?

RR: No. The first time I flew was from El Paso to Lubbock when I got out of basic training. They gave us eight days of leave after basic and I flew. My first time was on one of those twin-engine reciprocal engineer craft, anyhow. Loud, vibrating and everything, but that was my first flight was from El Paso into here.

LC: Did you at this point, were you thinking about aviation at all?

RR: I had been thinking about aviation ever since we were at Beaumont. The films that you saw when you went to the movies of the aircraft in Europe and the Pacific, everywhere else, all these islands. That just seemed like a thrilling thing to do to me.

LC: So you sort of had a love for this.

RR: I loved air.

LC: Sir, you were getting ready there at Newark to go over seas. I assume you had your orders in hand and knew where you were going.

RR: No. I was assigned to a replacement battalion in Germany is all I knew. We got to Germany and we got into this replacement company. To start with, we flew in and then had to take a train to wherever, I was trying to think but I can’t even remember where that place was. I took a train anyhow to the replacement company. We got there and we sit there about two days and then they called us in, called me in and said I was going to England and so I was put on a train. Then all the way from England up to Hook of Holland and then a ferry from there across into England. Then a train ride down town London and another train line out to Bushy Hall where the Army headquarters was there in England. It was about a three-day journey I think to get there, by train and ferry.

LC: Now, sir, did you have any idea why they pulled you out particularly and were reassigning you over to England?

RR: Because the repair part supply. They had a requirement for repair part supply person in England. At that time, the Army had these smoke generator battalions in all of the major air fields throughout the world to if they were happening to be an enemy attack to cover them with smoke so people couldn’t see the air craft. That was before all of this radar and imagery equipment we have these days. So they had a maintenance unit at RAF
(Royal Air Force) Station Shellingford. It was an old fighter base in World War II that had been closed down. They assigned me up to the 6th Chemical Maintenance Cell at RAF Station Shellingford.

LC: Sir, I want to ask you about your impressions of Europe for lack of a better word. I mean you started off in Germany. Was this to you an exciting event to be actually over in Europe?

RR: To me it was wonderful. I was seeing things that I had read about in books and seeing it in real. It wasn’t on a page in a book.

LC: Yes, sir. Like what do you remember particularly?

RR: You could still at that time in ’54 and ‘55 you could still see a lot of damage from World War II, the buildings, the things that hadn’t been replaced, the Rhine River. It was something that you read about. The wine from the Rhine I’d heard about, but it was actually there physically in front of you.

LC: It was the real thing.

RR: It was the real, real thing. I had read somewhere or saw a movie and I’m not sure which, about the trains in Europe and how you could just get anywhere by train. I was amazed at how efficient their train service was compared to what we had here.

LC: You went over to England. You said you went into central London. Do you remember that, what it was like?

RR: Really, I was just kind of in a fog then. I was in London a lot later. I saw everything in London, the palace, Trafalgar Square, Piccadilly Circus. I mean, I was all over one time or the other. I was just amazed at how fast so much of it had been reconstructed after the war because I had seen films where you know it was just down town area of London was just almost leveled. I was really amazed at how fast they had reconstructed it. I had trouble getting used to them driving on the wrong side of the road. That always bothered me.

LC: Yeah, you have to be careful when you step off the curve.

RR: Trying to understand them, it took a while to get to where I could understand them.

LC: You mean their accents.

RR: Their accent, yeah. Of course they had the same problem with me.
LC: So you were assigned up at RAF Shellingford. You were with a chemical
maintenance cell, is that right? Can you describe what the duties and the responsibilities
of that cell were?
RR: It was to provide maintenance for all of the chemical equipment and
weapons in England. Easier to rebuild or dispose of.
LC: What kinds of weapons are we talking about?
RR: Well, there was still some shells, mustard shells, chlorine shells and things
that were left over or as far back as World War I that were still there. Some were being
located at different times in different bunkers as they reopened them. You just prepared
them for shipment to get them out of the country.
LC: So they were being sent back to the U.S.?
RR: I don’t know where they went to. We just got them to port.
LC: What sorts of things did you actually do?
RR: What I did when I got there and the lieutenant that was in charge found out
that I could type, I became the company clerk. I typed the morning reports. I did the
payroll. I did everything that he needed done.
LC: You were found to be quite valuable then.
RR: He came in once a week and signed wherever he needed to sign. That was
about it.
LC: We chuckle about it, but was that something that you like wanted to do or
was it a little disappointing?
RR: No. I was at that point that anything I could learn. I don’t know, I just
approached it as a learning experience.
LC: You were at Shellingford for a year, or almost a year.
RR: No, two years.
LC: Oh, two years. Do you know those dates, sir? Would you have arrived there
in June 1955?
RR: Should be ’55 and we left in ’57.
LC: Where did you go next?
RR: I went to Baumholder, Germany, to the 12th Chemical Maintenance
Company.
LC: What was your assignment there?
RR: I was promoted. I was nailed the personnel clerk.
LC: You had done so well as company clerk.
RR: When I got into the company, Lieutenant Mayhue who was the company commander, he said that they really needed somebody to take over the personnel records for the company because the man doing it had just gone home on emergency leave. So I went over there and they had a captain in personnel at battalion level. He started teaching me and that’s where I was at until the unit gyroscoped.
LC: Now before I ask you about that, I would like to know either in Shellingford or in Baumholder, were you actively working on maintenance issues as well or were you pretty much in the office?
RR: Well, at both places I worked in the repair part supply function at both companies some. I did more of the going in and evaluating what they were doing, making suggestions of how to improve it. They recognized my training, but they preferred to use me elsewhere most of the time.
LC: Sir, you said you were gyroscoped. Can you describe what that is?
RR: Okay. The gyroscope was started in ’57 where they started trying to build a moving unit rather than individuals. They would move the whole unit and equipment from one location to another. Our unit was selected to go to Fort McClellan, Alabama, and a unit there was selected to come into Baumholder on a gyroscope movement to replace us. They loaded the whole unit, equipment, people, everything on ships and hauled you across the Atlantic.
LC: You went to Alabama to do what? What duties did you take up?
RR: I went to the personnel of the 1st Chemical Group or whatever they were. I think it was 1st Chemical Group. I went to steal the personnel clerk for the 12th Chemical Company, but I went to the group, chemical group as a personnel clerk.
LC: Now the rest of your units, the people whose careers you were overseeing basically with the personnel work, what were they engaged in doing?
RR: Maintenance of chemical equipment and munitions. You had two platoons, one that did equipment like the smoke generators, the decontamination units, and things like that. Maintain those, repair them and then you had a munitions unit that inspected
and repaired or disposed of ammunition. That’s smoke grenades, tear gas grenades, or all
the way up to in controlled areas. It wasn’t just openly done, but they even had the
capability to dispose of warheads with nerve agents and mustard and things like this.

LC: Yes, sir. Now did you have to have any particular training to be in a
chemical warfare unit, which essentially I guess you were?

RR: Oh, yeah. Most of the people in unit had gone through the chemical school
itself.

LC: But you were one of the few who had not?

RR: I was one of the few that had not. I got my training, on the job training.

LC: Did you have to go through any of the drills that—?

RR: Oh, yeah. It wasn’t just turn you loose and do it. It was training and drills
and one thing after another.

LC: Can you describe some of those special things that you had to do as part of a
chemical warfare unit?

RR: You had to be able to—first off, had to put on the protective clothing
properly to protect yourself, impregnated clothing properly, the mask, gloves and all this.
You had to be able to function in them. Claustrophobia would take over and they really
had trouble functioning for any length of time like that. You had to learn to do that. You
had to learn how to come through, undress the layers, go through decal, and
decontamination station, you know wash and shower station and redress.

LC: You mentioned impregnated clothing. Do you know what it was
impregnated with?

RR: I don’t remember at this time. That’s one of those things that has slipped my
mind. It’s back there in one of those storage cells I can’t get to right now.

LC: Can’t be accessed at the moment.

RR: Can’t access it today.

LC: Sir, were you thinking much just on your own time about the United States
supplies of chemical weapons and what it might be like to actually have to use those? Did
you give any thought to that or were you kind of doing the job?

RR: Oh, it was a scary thought. Anyone that had any idea of what could result
from chemical warfare that weren’t scared, then something was wrong with them. You
got just a matter of seconds to don your protective equipment or it’s too late. If it’s not readily at hand and how many people have it readily at hand? It could be a total disaster. The effects that it could have on loved ones and everybody else was a very scary thought too. The thing that I liked that was going on at that time, and I don’t mean I liked it in the stand point that I thought that’s what they ought to do, the military wasn’t satisfied with that. They were working on incapacitates that was just the temporary incapacitate a group and not be a permanent type thing rather than some of the things like the V Agents. So no one was satisfied to stay with something that was just going to be totally death. They were looking at other things. In fact several tests were run with different things. LSD was first used, I guess, by the military. Before it ever started getting used on the streets, that’s one of the temporary incapacitates and other things were. All of it was scary.

    LC: Do you think that—go ahead.
    RR: Go ahead, I’m sorry.
    LC: I was just going to ask whether the sense that you got from command and from the general atmosphere there at Fort McClellan, was that there was a healthy respect for the weapons and what they could do?
    RR: Very healthy. There was nothing that I saw from anyone other than a very healthy respect for what could happen. We always thought the best defense anybody ever used was to always be prepared. We just felt like if we were totally prepared then nobody was going to waste the effort.
    LC: Yes, sir. Sir, how long were you at Ft. McClellan at this time? I know you came back later.
    RR: Not very long.
    LC: Maybe six months or so, somewhere around that.
    RR: About six months.
    LC: Did you have much chance to get off base?
    RR: Oh, yeah. I spent a lot of time off base.
    LC: What kinds of stuff did you do?
    RR: Well, went around and I went and visited different Birmingham, Atlanta, up into the Appalachians, fishing in the lakes. There’s lots of lakes around there. There was
just lots of things to do. Being from West Texas, the thing that just amazed me was the
mountains with trees on them.

LC: Yes, sir. That whole area of northern Alabama, northern Georgia is heavily
forested and with mountains too.

RR: They weren’t big mountains, but they were mountains compared to what we
have here.

LC: Yes, sir. I wondered if you made any observations, you were there in 1957,
and I wonder if you made any observations about just beginning at that time the origins
of the civil rights movement? Did you see any changes in how blacks and whites were
acting toward each other, anything that caught your interest?

RR: You could start to see it then. I saw it a lot more when I came back. I spent
quite some time with it, civil rights movement after I got back.

LC: Well, I’ll ask you about that again in a few minutes. Sir, you left Fort
McClellan then. You received orders I gather for an overseas deployment.

RR: Yep. They came in and it never made sense. Emergency requirements for
Korea and they pulled me and some others out, but I was pulled out for an emergency
assignment to Korea, going to Korea, as a chemical staff specialist, not as a personnel
sergeant, as a chemical staff specialist.

LC: How did that come about?

RR: The orders came down from Washington, but then when I got to Korea I was
signed to the AG Section, the division adjutant general.

LC: Do you know what happened?

RR: Huh?

LC: Do you know what happened to—?

RR: I never knew what happened. I tried to get the orders changed. I told them, “I
just got back in the States.” They said, “Sorry, you got to go.”

LC: You were assigned to which unit?

RR: The 7th Infantry Division Headquarters, the adjutant general’s section.

LC: What did you do there?

RR: I was the AG morale services. I handled emergency leaves, compassionate
leaves, promotions, those things that affected the morale of the men in the 7th Division.
LC: Did you enjoy that work?
RR: Yeah. It was hard. It was hard on you because you had to make that decision whether a man got leave or didn’t get leave.
LC: I assume that you were given a whole bunch of criteria for things that had to be in place before you could grant some things.
RR: Oh, yeah. You had certain criteria you had to instill when it came down to the end, whether you had to split the hair and say yes or no then put a little draft memo on the colonel’s desk saying this is the way it is because if anything blew up on it, they was going to come to him, not me.
LC: Right, exactly, and he had to know what the basis of the decision had been.
Who were you reporting to at this time?
RR: Colonel Bowers, Vern Bowers.
LC: How do you spell his last name?
RR: B-O-W-E-R-S.
LC: How did you get along with him?
RR: Wonderful. He was a wonderful man.
LC: Do you know what his background was?
RR: He was personnel. All I know was is he was Army. I later flew for him in Vietnam. He was the director of personnel for USARV. Then he went from there to chief of staff personnel U.S. Army in Washington.
LC: Did he get promoted beyond Colonel? Do you know?
RR: Yeah, he was a general. That time I was flying he was a one star. I think he actually made two.
LC: Did he have an influence on your thinking about the military as a career or did you think of him primarily as a—?
RR: Well, he’s the one that I started talking to about flight school. When I was there I started talking to him about trying to get into flight school. I actually applied and he recommended flight school while I was in the 7th Division before I came back. He says, “What you do, if you’re wanting to go to OCS or flight school,” he said, “as long as you’re qualified, you may not be accepted, but reapply every year.” He said, “Keep sending it in until they get tired of seeing it.”
LC: Would you describe him as encouraging then of your aspirations to get into the cockpit?
RR: Right. Definitely.
LC: What were your impressions of Korea?
RR: Barren, mountains, cold.
LC: Not your favorite place then.
RR: Not my favorite place. I liked to froze to death and I was working inside. We had those little pot bellied stoves and the heat didn’t quite reach around the building.
LC: Did you find the work that you were doing, making decisions about compassionate leaves and so forth to be something that you struggled with a little bit?
RR: Oh, yeah. It was a struggle all the time. I would question myself: Did I do it right? It was always that reluctance I guess to say no one will leave, but knowing that if it didn’t meet the full criteria you had to. Perhaps that made me look at it closer because I was reluctant to say no. I made sure that I had covered all the tracks before I made a decision and before I made a recommendation to the colonel.
LC: Were there cases in which there was absolutely no question whatsoever that the servicemen should get a leave?
RR: Oh, yeah. Some of them were just automatic, a death of family, a wife in a hospital, things like this. It was just an automatic. We worked with the Red Cross to help get them out as fast as we could, get loans for them through the Red Cross if they didn’t have money for airfare once they got into the States. The military would fly them back, but once they got into the States they were on their own.
LC: Right and they had to get from their port of entry to their home presumably. Who did you work with at the Red Cross and how did that cooperation take place?
RR: Well, the director of the Red Cross there at the 7th Division, came in every morning and brought the messages in that had come in over night and handed them to me. I don’t remember who it was. I just remember he was kind of a redheaded, but that’s as far as I can—any messages that come in overnight he said, “This is what we got in last night.”
LC: Would you coordinate with a staff at the Red Cross to—?
RR: He would go in the colonel’s office and have a cup of coffee with him and I would go through them. Before he left I was in with the colonel and it was all done right away. Those that we knew that were definitely going on emergency leave, it was done right away.

LC: Because for many of them time was of the essence.

RR: Yeah because once we started it all there, we had to contact the unit to get orders cut, time the unit got them down to division, have the orders ready so the person could get on.

LC: Now did you spend much time off the base?

RR: In Korea?

LC: Yes.

RR: No. I went to Seoul one time. It was another young man from Tahoka, we were stationed at the 2nd Division. I met him in Seoul one time at the service club down there.

LC: Was that someone that you had actually known in Tahoka?

RR: Yeah, we had gone to school together.

LC: So you went to the service club in Seoul?

RR: Right.

LC: Did you stay in Seoul for a couple of days?

RR: We were there at a guesthouse in Seoul. They had a guesthouse there next to the service club that you could get the three day R&R (rest and recuperation) out of your unit, in country R&R. We stayed at it.

LC: When did you get orders that you were going to leave Korea?

RR: The first part of—or I guess the middle of November of ’58.

LC: Did those orders specify where you were off to next?

RR: Fort McClellan, Alabama. I’m going back to there.

LC: What were you going to be doing there?

RR: I was assigned to the headquarters and Headquarters Company of the post as a chemical staff specialist.

LC: What did that turn out to mean this time?

RR: I went to personnel.
LC: Yeah, I see a theme here.
RR: I went to personnel for a year.
LC: You were, at this time though, were beginning to actively think about flight school, is that right?
RR: Yeah. I applied while I was in Korea. It came back. I was in Fort McClellan when it came back. I was qualified but not accepted.
LC: Did you feel discouraged at that?
RR: No, because I had been told to expect it.
LC: So it wasn’t the blow that might have been?
RR: No.
LC: So you’re back in Fort McClellan and you were there for a number of years, is that right?
RR: Right.
LC: Okay. Approximately how long were you there?
RR: I was there until ’63.
LC: Were you working as a personnel officer the whole time?
RR: No, I was only in the personnel about six months.
LC: Then what happened?
RR: Then I went to the chemical section as a chemical staff specialist.
LC: Okay. What did that mean?
RR: Well, it meant I was assigned to the 2nd Field Counter Intelligence Unit and was sent to Mississippi. We were observing problems that might occur during the process of integration at Jackson, Oxford, Tupelo, Greenville, and—
LC: Did you get any special training for this?
RR: No. Our cover was we were validating allotments.
LC: What does that mean?
RR: We went out if somebody was getting an allotment from somebody, we went out to verify that that person was who they said they were and that they had the number of children they said they were and things like this. This gave us free access to lots of communities.
LC: And a reason to be there.
RR: And a reason to be there.

LC: Can you describe what you were, I mean in general terms, what you were really actually doing?

RR: Looking for Ku Klux Klan activity or there was also a black movement going for violence demonstrations versus nonviolent demonstrations. It was to try to head off either or both. We didn’t do it. I mean we just reported. We didn’t make any contact with anybody other than the people that we verified allotments on.

LC: Right. Now your principal job was done, if I’m right and correct me if I’m wrong, making observations and sending reports in?

RR: We had a contact point each week to meet someone and give our reports. We had a number to call if there was something under emergency type situation came up.

LC: Okay. Were you working as teams or how many people were doing this kind of thing in that area?

RR: I have no idea how many. I was an individual.

LC: Were there people who operated together?

RR: I have no idea. I was called into this unit that said that they had a special mission they needed some special people for. They had heard from the people around the post and everything else that I had a good rapport with the black people there on the post or at that time they called them colored people. I said, “Well, I’ve tried to always have a good rapport with them.” I said, “They’re human just like I am.” He says, “Well, we need somebody to go over there and validate some allotments for us and while they’re validating if they see anything to let us know.”

LC: How long were you with the 2nd Field?

RR: About two years.

LC: Two years.

RR: I was just attached to them. I was still assigned to the post chemical section for McClellan.

LC: Did you have to go back to the post very much?

RR: No, I got to go back once a month for three days.

LC: Other than that, where did you live? Did you stay in hotels or what did you do?
RR: Hotels, motels, civilian clothes. I was at Oxford the day James Meredith went to school there, his first day. Oxford, Mississippi.

LC: Yes, sir. Can you describe what happened that day and what you remember about it?

RR: Well, I can describe several days of protest and the Army coming in and setting up bivouac in the football stadium. I was thinking about it when I saw Texas Tech playing ball there this year. I can remember when part of the 101st was bivouacked in the football field there. They brought all the MP (Military Police) units in and other units in. There were people from all over from the north, the south, the east, and the west that had come in there, some with good intentions, some with not so good intentions. The state was determined that he wasn’t going to school there, but then in the end he was escorted by federal marshals into class and did go.

LC: Yes, sir. Can you describe the tension that was present there? How did it feel to you as an observer?

RR: Terrible. It felt like something just—I don’t know, you’re just afraid that if anybody made the wrong move it was just going to be a disaster. The National Guard Army was nothing but a supply depot. The Reserve Army had been turned into nothing but supply depots of supplies and things. There was back up troops that weren’t at the campus itself.

LC: Where were those troops? Do you know?

RR: They were at the Reserve and Guard Armories and in the vicinity of them. There were people all along the routes coming in. We were really looking for people who were going to try to do some violent—we had heard that there was going to try to be some Molotov type of cocktail thrown that day and stuff like this. They were trying to locate people that were going to do something like this. I think the federal marshals or the state troopers, somebody found two or three, but not in the large quantity that they had expected.

LC: Sir, how long were you actually in Oxford around that time period?

RR: I was there for five days.

LC: Okay.

RR: I was in and out before then during the troop build up.
LC: Who within the Army structure knew that you were there? Did the guys—?
RR: No one.
LC: Who were you reporting to?
RR: I don’t know who they were. I don’t ever want to know.
LC: I’m with you, sir. Can you describe in general, you said you had a contact point each week. How did that kind of go down, and again just in general terms?
RR: Meeting in a restaurant, eating, discussing what we knew, if we had information and we did it in such a way, “Here’s the allotments we validated this week and they all appeared to be in pretty good shape or there’s a couple in question.” You handed the envelope to them.
LC: With presumably your typed—
RR: They were hand written. They weren’t typed. They were hand written.
LC: Okay.
RR: You just handed it all to them.
LC: Then would you learn at that time where you were supposed to be next week?
RR: Yeah. We were given a list of people getting allotments too. It’s not comical, but it happened. During this period of time in one place south of Jackson we found out when we were doing this, we had one lady, she was getting allotments from four different (inaudible).
LC: She was, huh?
RR: Yeah.
LC: She was quite clever then.
RR: She was clever. She had the system figured out.
LC: Yeah, I guess so.
RR: One was in the Army. One was in the Navy. One was in the Air Force and one was in the Coast Guard. She was getting allotments from all of them. In that time you didn’t have this cross-reference of social security numbers and all of that stuff they can place in the computers.
LC: Everything had to kind of be done with shoe leather and figuring it out. Sir, when you were on this detail in Mississippi, did you ever encounter or see Martin Luther King?

RR: Yeah.

LC: Can you describe that at all?

RR: He always was fighting within his own staff, this business of non-violence. Everybody was always encouraging him, “We’ve got to do this. We’ve got to do this,” but he always stuck with this non-violent approach to the whole works. He was a brave man is all I can say.

LC: Yes, sir. Did you ever hear him speak?

RR: I have his speech, several of his speeches. I use them in working with the youth in the youth program at the food bank.

LC: You use them now.

RR: Yeah.

LC: Yes. How do actually make the observations that you were supposed to be detailing on up the chain, wherever they were going? Did you go to churches? Did you hang out at restaurants? How did you—?

RR: Restaurants. At that time, throughout the south, there were certain restaurants, Alabama, Mississippi, Tennessee, Georgia, everywhere, that the front of the restaurant was a nice little restaurant, the back of the restaurant they had all this Ku Klux Klan information and stuff in it and where different ones met. If there was no traffic in that area, there wasn’t an abundance of cars at this restaurant, but if you went to the restaurant and there are twenty cars, but you’ve only got five customers up front you knew something was going on in the back.

LC: Yes, sir. How did you feel about doing this work? Did you feel that you were trying to help avoid serious problems?

RR: Avoiding disgrace for our country. I thought it was a disgrace the way that some of the blacks and Hispanics here in Texas were being treated at that particular time in my life. Having traveled around with a migrant farmer, I kind of saw a lot of it. It wasn’t just the blacks and Hispanics, even the poor white. The way the people were being
treated—I don’t know, it’s just always been one of those platforms I got up and expressed
my opinions on.

LC: Were you able to locate any white supremacist activities? Did you actually
gather some data?

RR: Oh, yes.

LC: You did.

RR: There was lots of efforts the Ku Klux Klan organized during that time that
never got off the ground because of the federal intervention. They can argue as much as
they want to about the use of federal troops during that period of time, but I hate to think
what would have happened if we hadn’t have.

LC: Because the potential for—

RR: The potential for destruction of people and property.

LC: Were you able to also work pretty well among black activists of whatever
stripe? Were you able to gather data there as well?

RR: Yes.

LC: Sir, you said you did this work for a couple of years. When did you find out
you were going to be doing something else?

RR: I reached a point that the Army felt like my cover had been compromised
and they thought that I ought to go to Germany for a while.

LC: Okay. (Roy laughs) Was that something you were happy with?

RR: I had to be happy with it.

LC: Oh, okay. No choice, huh?

RR: Well, you know.

LC: Yes, sir. When they tell you to go, you have to go. When was it that you left?

RR: In 1963.

LC: Was that the spring of ’63?

RR: No, it was the end of ’63.

LC: The end of ’63?

RR: Yeah.

LC: Do you remember President Kennedy’s assassination?
RR: Wait, I was in Europe before. I went before he was assassinated because I was in Europe when he was assassinated. I was in Germany.

LC: You were in Germany?

RR: Yeah.

LC: Your assignment there was to which unit? Do you remember?

RR: 24th Infantry division, 1st Battalion, 21st Infantry as chemical staff specialist.

LC: What were you actually doing?

RR: Chemical staff specialist, finally.

LC: What did that mean since that was almost a new job really?

RR: At that time they had placed the Davy Crockett weapon system and the tactical units in Europe. They had put the chemical staff specialist there because if you were going to use a weapon you had to know where the fall out was going to go. We were there to prepare fall out predictions, provide training for chemical and biological as well as radiological. We trained with the units right down to the infantry company, just continuously.

LC: Can you describe the Davy Crockett system for someone who wouldn’t be familiar with it?

RR: It’s a small, easily transportable nuclear weapon, low yield that could be fired at battalion level. They were kept at battalion level.

LC: Do you know how many were deployed? How many of the systems were deployed in Germany?

RR: A bunch. Those and at the same time they had come up with the ADMs (atomic demolition munitions), Atomic Demolitions, to blow bridges and things, to slow the Russian advance. That’s when everybody was sure the Russians were going to come through the Fulda Gap.

LC: You were responsible for also planning for protection from fall out?

RR: Yep.

LC: For troops or civilians or both?

RR: Well, for the tactical units is what we were dealing with. They had evacuation plans for our families. They had to keep bags packed and things ready to go.
The plan was to have them evacuated. I don’t think it would have ever worked, but that was the plan.

LC: Now why do you say that, sir?
RR: Can you imagine trying to evacuate somebody from Munich all the way into France to get them out of country?

LC: Was that the idea?
RR: Yeah, that was the idea. I mean, if they’re going to fly them out of Munich, maybe, but road evacuation.

LC: Is that what they were talking about was actually trying to plan road use?
RR: Road evacuation. Half the cars wouldn’t have gas. It would have been a disaster. In my opinion, that’s only opinion.

LC: Right, sure. Did you kind of think that at the time?
RR: Oh, yeah. All we were was a delaying force. Every person in Europe was there for one reason that was just to delay till they could get reinforcements in. We were all expendable, including our families.

LC: Right. Sir, what was, if you recall and can say, the basic idea for evacuating families? How were they supposed to rally, organize, and get away from the dangerous area?
RR: They had block warrants that they rallied in blocks. They were supposed to come around and check the bags ever so often, make sure they had blankets and certain things in them and ready to go and a certain amount of clothing. In case of a full scale alert they were all to move out in blocks.

LC: In private cars?
RR: In private cars, but like I say half of them wouldn’t have had gas, or just broke down. It wasn’t even reasonable.

LC: Were the families supposed to have or did they have issued to them protective clothing or masks?
RR: No. No protective clothing, no nothing.

LC: Was there going to be any kind of military priority assigned to them, say on the road?
RR: They had units that their job was to escort them. After the civilian components passed certain stages in their evacuation, certain bridges were to be blown so they couldn’t be used by anyone else. I mean it was a plan.

LC: It was a big plan.

RR: It was a big plan and a lot of dreaming.

LC: Sir, how long were you in Germany?

RR: Until I went to flight school in ’65.

LC: So as you said earlier you were there when President Kennedy was shot.

RR: Yes. I was visiting a friend of mine, Bill Weatherly. He and I were married to cousins I guess and we were visiting them when we heard the word that Kennedy had been assassinated.

LC: What reaction did you have as a serviceman overseas? How did you feel?

RR: Disbelief at first. Then you started thinking about who did, is it a conspiracy? Then they called an alert then they called it off before I could even pack to get out of his house they called the alert off.

LC: What would the alert have had you do?

RR: We’d just gone to the field to our—we had our certain positions that everybody moved to during an alert. We were just going to those positions and held and waiting on orders. Like I say, before I could even leave his house they had called it off.

LC: That was fast. In the back of your mind did you have—you hadn’t been out of the country all that long. Did you have some apprehension about what might happen for example in the south?

RR: Yeah, I was concerned about what might happen in the entire country. Things just might crumble right then.

LC: Roy, what were your sources of information? Where did you actually hear about the shooting?

RR: Where did we hear about it?

LC: Yeah.

RR: On AFN, Armed Forces Radio Network.

LC: Was that the source that you had the best access to?
RR: Yes. Everything else was German. It was the only American broadcast we had in Munich.

LC: What were things like if you remember for the couple three or four days after the assassination?

RR: Everybody’s just running around ringing their hands in disbelief. Everybody was speculating on what happened, who was responsible and all this. It was no different there than what it was anywhere else. It was just a lot of speculation. The colonel summed it up, Colonel Becton whose was Battalion Commander, he said, “This will be one of those things we’ll probably never know.”

LC: He said that even at that time.

RR: Even at that time. That’s pretty true.

LC: Yes, sir. As a Texan, did you feel anything particular about the shooting having happened here?

RR: You know it didn’t even cross my mind that it happened in Texas at that time. Later it did, but right then it didn’t. The only thing, I was just in total disbelief that it happened period.

LC: So, sir, I take it over the time that you were in Germany until 1965 you were continuing to apply to flight school, is that accurate?

RS: That’s it. I did just what Colonel Bowers had told me to do. I applied every year.

LC: Did anybody else ever come along and say, “You keep going, Roy. One time you’ll get in”?

RR: There was a Major Bell that was with the 24th Division there in Germany that had been in the 7th Division when I took my first check ride. He had been a lieutenant then. He saw me one day and he says, “I thought you’d be flying now.” I said, “Well, I would hope to.” But I said, “They keep saying I’m qualified but not accepted.” He said, “Well, how long has it been since you applied the last time?” I said, “About eleven months.” He said, “Get your application together and get it in again.” He said, “They’re looking for pilots for Vietnam.” He said, “They’ll let you in now.”

LC: Were you paying much attention to what President Johnson had been doing with regards to Southeast Asia and Vietnam?
RR: Oh, yeah. I knew. Everybody knew that if you went to flight school they
were going to Vietnam but everybody was going from Europe to Vietnam. They were
taking people, giving them thirty days leave in the States and sending them straight over.

LC: This would have been in early 1965?

RR: In ’65, yeah.

LC: What did you think about the position that you were in. If you wanted to go
to flight school then you were definitely going to go to Vietnam. Did that bother you at
all?

RR: Well, I figured I’d rather be in the air than on the ground.

LC: Okay. Yes, sir.

RR: I don’t like snakes.

LC: Was there much scuttlebutt, just kind of informal talk about Vietnam and the
conflict and what it would be like being in the jungle and all of that when you were still
in Germany?

RR: Well, there’s a lot of talk about it. At that time, it was before they had started
moving major American units over there. It was more like the Advisory Teams that at
some places the Vietnamese were really good fighters, other places they weren’t, just
hearing this kind of stuff.

LC: But it was just all kind of grapevine type stuff?

RR: It was all grapevine stuff, but people were getting orders in Germany.

They’d leave in the States and then right on to Vietnam, even then.

LC: You got your acceptance to flight school just about when? Do you
remember?

RR: It would have been ’66. I probably got my acceptance around April, maybe
March of ’66.

LC: Would that actually have been ’65, do you think, or ’66?

RR: ’65.

LC: Okay, in there somewhere anyway.

RR: Yeah. Yeah because I was in Vietnam ’66.

LC: Yes, sir. I’m actually going from the forms that you filled out, which were
very detailed.
RR: I don’t have the forms in front of me.

LC: Well, I’ll help you along. You were told to report where for flight school?

RR: Fort Walters, Texas.

LC: Did you get a break in there? Did you get a leave?

RR: Yeah. I got the thirty days leave.

LC: What did you do with your leave? Do you remember?

RR: I visited my family in Texas.

LC: Did it feel good to you to come back to Texas?

RR: Yeah. I enjoyed it. I had a good visit and did a lot of running, getting ready for flight school.

LC: Getting the physical—

RR: Physically ready. I had heard that the first four weeks, the pre-flight part of it for four weeks, that that’s where they lost most of them was falling out physically, especially older people like me.

LC: You were all of—

RR: Thirty-one. Most of them going through were twenty-one so I was ten years older than the average.

LC: What kind of shape were you in? Were you—?

RR: Well, I was in pretty decent shape because I had been with an infantry unit in Germany and had been training with them all the time. What I did while I was on leave was do more running than anything else to try to get my stamina built up because I had heard that each morning you could count on anywhere from two to four miles during pre-flight and getting harassed while you were doing it.

LC: Were you excited, aside from the PT about beginning the flight training that you had been trying to get into for so long?

RR: Yes. I was ready to go. A little apprehensive, it’s that unknown out there, but at the same token I was ready to go. It was what I wanted to do.

LC: Now, sir, after the pre-flight period, can you describe the work that you had to do in flight school? What did you do on an average day?

RR: Well, in pre-flight you started your classes on the principles of flight, things like this, your basic entry classes and the customs and courtesy of service. You learned
what an officer did and didn’t do. You went through psychoanalysis where this
psychologist tried to determine if you were crazy or not. While we were in there, we were
called into the theatre one day. They passed us out a little five by eight card, five by
seven card and said, “We want you to put on this card every experience you’ve had in
fixed wing flight. Whether it’s observer, a passenger into commercial airplane, whatever,
write it down and put your name on it and turn it in.” So we did. In a little while they
started calling off names and everybody is leaving. I figured, “Well, there’s the ones
going to fixed wing flight training.” Got down to the ones of us left in the room and he
says, “Okay, you gentlemen can go back to the barracks and pack your bags. You’re
leaving tomorrow for Fort Rucker for fixed wing flight training.” The Army hadn’t had a
warrant officer fixed wing flight training in years. We were the first one for them to start
back up again.

LC: Were you excited about that assignment?
RR: Yeah. I didn’t think I’d ever get to fly a fixed wing. I figured helicopters
were all I would ever get to fly.

LC: Right, because that’s what they were calling up so quickly.
RR: That’s what they needed, but the 219th Unit I ended up with in Vietnam was
supposed to have both aircraft. They were supposed to have helicopters and fixed wing to
evaluate them to see which one was the best platform for observation in some of the other
units. They were looking at this new thing that the Marines keep having trouble with,
well, a tilt rotor thing. At that time the Army was involved with the development. It was
Army funds being used to develop it. You had to be familiar with the principles of rotary
and fixed wing flight. They were looking at having to have people for that program when
they selected us.

LC: Was your training supposed to take place at Fort Rucker?
RR: Went to Fort Rucker, Alabama, for my training.

LC: So back to Alabama again?
RR: Yeah, back to Alabama.

LC: How long did the training last, sir?
RR: Thirty-six weeks.
LC: Sir, can you describe what it was that you were initially introduced to in terms of aviation training?

RR: The first thing on the flight line was an orientation flight with an instructor pilot. The orientation lasted about twenty seconds and then he gave you the stick. Says, “You got it.” We started flying, practicing touch and go landings.

LC: Now what aircraft were you using?

RR: O-1 Bird Dog.

LC: They just pretty much put you in the seat and made you start doing it.

RR: Well, you’re in the front seat and the instructor’s in the back seat. Of course he’s following you on the controls to keep you from killing both of you. I think twelve hours later was the first solo flight, which was a scary thing.

LC: Can you describe that?

RR: Well, I was having trouble. I kept hitting and bouncing, hitting the front wheels first and then bouncing and everything else. So we’re taking off and we’re going along. It was Bud Lard who was my instructor. He had about fifty-seven thousand hours flight time. Maybe not that many but a bunch. Anyhow, we’re flying around the pattern and I’m going downwind and he said, “See this?” He’s got a stick of the airplane in his hand. I said, “Yes, sir.” He went and he threw it out the window. He said, “Now go and land this thing.” Here I am. It was just like cold ice that went through my veins. I’m thinking I’ve got the only stick to control this airplane. He just threw his out the window. I went around and I made the prettiest landing I ever made then or ever since. He told me to taxi it up and he got out and he said, “Okay, go solo.” I went out there scared. I mean, everything is trying to go through your mind, what you’re supposed to do. I went around three times and made three crash landings and taxied back up. He motioned for me to shut the aircraft down. I shut it down. Then when I got out I looked and there was still a stick in the back of the airplane. Those guys were good. They had all kind of tricks up their sleeve to get you to move forward.

LC: Do you know what Bud’s background was?

RR: He had been an Army aviator or Army Air Corps aviator in World War II and Korea and had been an instructor pilot at Fort Rucker ever since.

LC: Was he someone who was important to you over the course of the training?
RR: Oh, yeah. He passed on little pointers here and little pointers there to help get through.

LC: How did you do, Roy, with the fact that you were kind of the old man, really, going through this training with all the youngsters?

RR: I had my problems.

LC: I’m sure. Any incidents that you remember that you might want to talk about, or not?

RR: Well, the biggest thing was in the advance premiere flight training. We got into the second phase. That’s where you start doing the short field landings. This is another instructor. That whole thing has just been blacked out of my system for years. You have some things you never want to remember, but he was giving me a force landing. I had picked this field out and was making a force landing. He says, “I’ve got it.” About the time he says, “I’ve got it,” I looked and we had power lines right in front of us. The power lines hit the windscreen of the aircraft and left big ridges on them. How we flew out of it, I don’t know. We did. Then he went and made some test landings to make sure the gear and everything was okay on the airplane, but that scared me so bad. I was really ground shy after that. It took me a long time. I almost washed out because of it.

LC: Now, sir, when you say ground shy, what does that mean?

RR: It means you don’t want to get close enough to the ground to really land.

You’re afraid you’re going to hit something again I guess. I was sitting with the colonel and he says, “Well, do you want to go back and be an NCO (noncommissioned officer) or do you want to finish this thing?” I said, “I want to finish it.” He said, “Well, I’m going to give you ten more hours and I’m going to give you a military instructor.” He gave me—I keep trying to get the name on it, but I just can’t remember. Anyhow he got me a captain that had been in Vietnam and did come back to fly with me. He got out and he worked me. You talk about ten hours work. It was ten hours of work. In the end I got an A on my check riding, went onto tactical training from there.

LC: Now did that fellow who had Vietnam experience, did he talk to you at all about having been over there?
RR: Oh, yeah. He talked to me about over there, about flying over there. What kind of missions they were flying and how important. At that time they didn’t have the observation helicopters and how important the O-1’s were.

LC: Yes, sir. Did he relate to you anything about his own personal experience over there that made you feel one way or the other about Vietnam or were you just gathering information?

RR: All he told me, he said, “All of the strips are short. All of the aircraft are heavy when they put the armor plate on the seat.” He said, “You’ve got to conquer the short field in advantage.” He said, “Use your peripheral vision. Quit looking in front of you. Start using your peripheral vision as you come in.” He’s the one that really started working with me on using that peripheral vision for short fieldwork.

LC: How important was working with him in terms of you getting not only back to speed but prepared for what was going to come in Vietnam?

RR: It was real important. The first field I had to operate out of I think was twelve hundred feet long when I got into country.

LC: So he wasn’t kidding about those short—

RR: He wasn’t kidding.

LC: Sir, you said that you went on to the advanced—

RR: We went on from there to the tactical training.

LC: And that was where?

RR: In tactical you go out and you actually bivouac in the field. Fly out of the field location. You get night missions and day missions, low level, cross country, short field day and night, radio relay missions.

LC: This was all still in Alabama?

RR: All still in Alabama, yes.

LC: Did you have to learn also to account for weather conditions and so on?

RR: Oh, yeah.

LC: Can you tell me about that part of training?

RR: What they always taught us to do was to know the climate of the land we’re flying in. He said, “Like in Vietnam, you’ve got a dry season. If it’s dry inland it’s going to be wet on the coast. If it’s dry on the coast it’s going to be wet inland because of your
prevailing winds blow off the continent or onto the continent.” He said, “When you get an assignment somewhere you’re not always going to have the Air Force with you so you need to always look at this and learn how to determine the climate. A little climatology of the area you are in because you may be your own forecaster. Don’t get yourself out there and boxed in where you can’t fly out.”

LC: Did that advice stand you in good stead?
RR: Yeah.
LC: Yeah. I would think that would be very helpful. Now sir after you finished at Fort Rucker, where did you go?
RR: Well, I started—when I finished Fort Rucker, I started the next Monday to do helicopter transition. I actually got into the second week of helicopter transition. I had a gallbladder attack and went into the hospital. When I came out they had changed my orders and they had me going to Fritzsche Army Airfield, Fort Ord, California, for Otter transition.
LC: Can you tell what Otter transition was?
RR: The Otter is a big bush plane from Canada de Havilland, big reciprocal. It hauls eighteen passengers. A beast to fly because the fuse light is so big the wind just pushes it everywhere. They used it in a lot of the short field areas in Vietnam to move people and equipment in and out of. Young warrant officers got his first introduction to have some staff looks at aviators.
LC: Looks at?
RR: We got to Fort Ord and I reported to personnel. The lady says, “Before we can process you, you have to go talk to the chief of staff.” I said, “What?” She said, “All aviators have to go talk to the chief of staff.” I found out where the chief of staff was and went in and told his post sergeant major who I was. He said, “Another one of those aviators, huh?” I said, “Yes, sir.” I reported to the chief of staff and he said, “Mr. Riddle, we do not like the Army flight suit. We do not want the Army flight suit on our post. We do not want to see you on our post unless you’re in Class-A uniforms or in coat and tie. Therefore we’re going to give you a statement of unavailability of quarters and mess and we don’t expect you to be here.” I’m just there with my mouth wide open. I don’t know what’s going on. You’ve fought all these years and you’re kind of proud of the fact that
you graduated from flight school and got your wings. Now here is somebody saying he
doesn’t want you.

LC: What was behind that?
RR: Their general didn’t like flight suits.
LC: Oh, brother. Did you have to—?
RR: I had to go find an apartment. I just thought I would stay in the BOQ (bachelor officer’s quarters) and only be there for three or four weeks and stay in a BOQ and be gone. Had to go find an apartment, live off of it, rent a car, get to the airfield.

LC: What was the content of the training at Fort Ord again?
RR: It was the Otter, the transition. It was just a transition training, learn to fly.
LC: And learning that aircraft?
RR: Learning the aircraft, yeah.
LC: So at this point, how many aircraft had you either officially qualified on or were comfortable with?
RR: I qualified on the O-1 Bird Dog, the Beaver, which is a single engine Otter, the Beech Baron, which is a twin-engine beech craft and now the Otter.
LC: At what point did you find out that you were going to be moving out of Fort Ord?
RR: I knew when I got there. I was en route to Vietnam.
LC: Did you know what your departure date was going to be?
RR: It said upon completion of training. It said report to Travis Air Force Base. It didn’t give a date. It just said upon completion of training.
LC: Was the training a certain set amount of time for the Otter? Did you know how long that was going to be?
RR: Well, it was kind of individually timed. It took me three weeks. I think one guy got through in two and there’s another one that took four or five. You could pace yourself. The first week mechanical systems were taught and that kind of thing and then after that you were just self-paced. You either flew morning or afternoon depending on availability of aircraft. The other half of the day you did nothing.
LC: Sir, your rank at this time was what?
RR: Warrant officer W-1.
LC: For somebody who didn’t really know what warrant officer was, how would you describe your position within the military structure?

RR: The warrant officer is between the enlisted and the commission grades. The warrant officer is reserved for people in technical fields. More than for the leadership qualities, it’s for the technical training aviation. I don’t know I would say eighty percent of their pilots are warrant officers because of the technical training involved. It’s cheaper for the Army that way to pay a warrant officer than to have to pay a captain. Budgetary restraints probably enter into it too.

LC: Do you have any special—are there any special courtesies or such?

RR: You’re given the same courtesies as an officer, but you don’t have the same responsibilities. In other words you can’t command and things like that, like an officer can.

LC: Would you have access—?

RR: You have access to the officer’s club, everything that an officer has. In fact most officers are jealous of you because you get more respect than they get because most warrants had enlisted service prior to getting there. So they had more experience under their belt.

LC: Sir, as you were looking forward at this point, towards getting over to Vietnam, how would you describe your—if you can remember—your perception of going over there? Would you say anxious or couldn’t wait or—?

RR: Well, I don’t think it’s a, “you can’t wait.” It’s kind of an apprehensive type thing. You know that you’re a career soldier. That’s where you belong, but at the same token you’re apprehensive. Do I know what I want to do? Can I do what I want to do? How am I going to hold up under fire? Everything runs through your mind.

LC: Did you mention that you were married at this point?

RR: Yes.

LC: Where was your wife living?

RR: In Alabama.

LC: So she had stayed in Alabama?

RR: Right.

LC: Sir, do you remember going over to Travis on your way over to Vietnam?
RR: Right.
LC: What happened at Travis? How long were you there?
RR: I was there probably two days. I let a dentist talk me into letting them remove an impacted wisdom tooth. I got a dry socket and when I got to Travis, it was killing me. I know they thought I was just trying to get out of going to Vietnam, but I was trying to get help. Finally they got a dentist to repack it. By the time I got to Vietnam it was a dry socket again. I was in misery.
LC: There’s nothing worse, sir, I think.
RR: I was just in total misery.
LC: How did you get this taken care of?
RR: I finally got to a unit. I finally went to the 21st Evac Hospital in Vietnam for a couple of days to get it straightened out. That’s after I’d flown for a while.
LC: So upon arrival you’re not feeling very well.
RR: No, I’m hurting. I go into Camp Alpha at Saigon. When you look out all you see is these streets of water and trash and dirt and you wonder, “Where am I and what has happened?” It’s a totally new world.
LC: Was that your first impression of Vietnam?
RR: Yeah, that was my first impression. I mean, they had officers that were doubled bunked. You couldn’t hardly move to get between them to get in them. I hate to think how they had the enlisted people billeted there.
LC: How long did you actually have to stay at Alpha?
RR: I was Alpha two days.
LC: And probably couldn’t wait to be moving on to somewhere else.
RR: I was ready to go.
LC: Where did you move to?
RR: I went from there to Army Caribou. That’s where the Air Force got the caribous. I went from there to Nha Trang, to the 223rd Aviation Battalion.
LC: Was that going to end up being your battalion home?
RR: That was my battalion, not my company, but that was my battalion. I got there, Colonel Richardson, who was battalion commander, called me in and he said, “Roy, as a warrant officer,” he said, “I can’t assign you to an O-1 unit.” He says, “I’ve
got an Otter company, but I’m short pilots in the O-1 Company and I sure would like for you to go over if you’re willing to go.” I said, “Send me where you need me.”

LC: Did you really?
RR: Yeah.
LC: Did you have a sense of what the duties were for the O-1 pilots?
RR: I knew it was recon. I knew that’s what it was.
LC: You just said, “Whatever you need put me there?”
RR: He assigned me to the 219th Recon Airplane Company at Pleiku.
LC: You moved on up to Pleiku then?
RR: Went to Pleiku.
LC: The 219th as I understand it, and correct me again if I’m mistaken, had a number of different platoons.
RR: Yes. We were the only aircraft company in Vietnam that had six flight platoons.
LC: Were they operationally different or were they geographically?
RR: Geographically and operationally. When I first got there I was with the 6th Platoon at Pleiku. It was a general support platoon, flying in support of the 4th Infantry Division. That was my first assignment was with them.
LC: By supporting the 4th, what did that mean?
RR: We were flying observers, artillery observers, flying combat observation missions for them, radio relay at night. Then each of us had a sector that we flew recon on at least once every day, twice a day if possible because if you’re looking at that same sector all the time you’re able to pick up minute changes.
LC: You would have some familiarity with it so you’d know.
RR: Right.
LC: How many aircraft were in the platoons?
RR: Six normally.
LC: Were they all the same aircraft? They were all O-1s?
RR: They were all O-1s.
LC: Let’s go ahead and take a break here for a minute
RR: Okay.
Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins with the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. I’m continuing my oral history interview with Cpt. Roy Riddle. Today’s date is the sixth of February 2004. I am again in the interview room in the Special Collections Library on the campus of Texas Tech. Captain Riddle is in Tahoka. Good morning, sir.

Roy Riddle: Good morning.

Laura Calkins: I thought we would pick up with talking a little bit more about your first few days in beginning your first tour in October of 1966. Sir, what were some of the first impressions you formed upon actually arriving at the 223rd Aviation Battalion?

Roy Riddle: It was hot, humid. I don’t know if I had ever been that miserable before. I thought I had here in West Texas, but I’m not sure that I had.

Laura Calkins: The humidity was probably—

Roy Riddle: The humidity was just terrible there on the coast because the 223rd was in Nha Trang. It was right on the coast. It must have been in the 90s when we arrived there. The thing was it didn’t cool off at night because of the humidity. It was there.

Laura Calkins: How did you compensate for that? Did you just—?

Roy Riddle: Liquids. Then what happened was that all the water over there was treated and then from that came diarrhea. Everybody that came in-country had probably ten days to two weeks or more of diarrhea just adjusting to their system, adjusting to the water.

Laura Calkins: You already didn’t feel good.

Roy Riddle: I was already sick from the tooth, the dry socket with the tooth. So it was kind of a miserable period of time.

Laura Calkins: Yes, sir. It doesn’t sound very good. As we said yesterday, you joined the 6th Platoon of the 219th, which is the head—

Roy Riddle: 219th Recon Airplane Company.

Laura Calkins: That group is known as the Headhunters.

Roy Riddle: As the Headhunters. They took on the name of the Headhunters I think the year I arrived. It was either ’65 or ’66 before I arrived. It was early part of the year before
I arrived there because everyone that they were flying for, particularly members of the 25th Division was referring to them as the Headhunters. So they just took on that call sign.

LC: That was already in use when you arrived there?
RR: Yes it was. I have an item that I’m donating to the archives that was given to me, a history of the unit from the time it arrived in-country until my arrival that tells when they started using that.

LC: That will be a very welcome addition. Now, when did you actually come by that?
RR: It was given to me on arrival in the company.
LC: On arrival?
RR: Yeah. There was a lot of esprit de corps in the unit and a very high pride in their ability to obtain targets and to soften them and to provide the combat observation for troops in combat or in contact.

LC: You were supporting the 4th Division at this point.
RR: Right. It was the 3rd Brigade of the 25th Division in the 4th. It had originally been totally the 25th. Just about the time I’m arriving in-country, it was during—’66 is when it really started the influx of Americans. The 4th Division had been moved into the Pleiku area, but they retained the 3rd Brigade of the 25th. Our company was set up where that we had one platoon supporting different districts or different providences throughout II Corps. Then our platoon, the 6th Platoon, was supporting American forces. I was wrong on the number of aircraft. We had eight aircraft that we were flying in support of American forces there.

LC: How many pilots?
RR: In the unit, we had one pilot for each aircraft. That was the authorized strength. The way I got there, the unit was short pilots and that’s when Colonel Richardson had said that he couldn’t sign a warrant officer to a Bird Dog unit because he called for all commissioned officers, but he needed help there. That’s when I agreed to go up there.

LC: Now the O-1 that you were flying, you were flying alone?
RR: Yes.
LC: Can you describe the equipment on the aircraft?

RR: On the wings we had two white phosphorous rockets on each wing for marking targets. That was the only armament and it was not for offensive use. It was for target marking. Inside the aircraft we had two FM radios. They were set up with the capability that we could fly radio relay and automatically relay from one through the other and us not have to repeat the message because so much is lost when you have to take a message down and repeat it. They were set up so that we could provide radio relay without having to repeat messages. We had an FM honer so we could hone in on a position. Kind of works like the localizer on an ILS (instrument landing system) system. We had a UHF (ultra high frequency) radio. We had a single side band, but it never worked. Now this one we were supposed to be able to communicate anywhere in the world on it, but it never worked.

LC: Did you ever ask guys to repair it?

RR: Well, it was because of the climatic conditions there. The transmission bounced. Rather than being received in our locale or within the II Corps area it was received like in the States. One day I was talking to somebody in Miami, Florida, and Tampa, Florida. You could talk to people all over the world, but not there.

LC: But not thirty miles away.

RR: No. That’s why I said it was—a lot of the aircraft they just took them out to reduce the weight. Most of the aircraft had an armor plate under the pilot seat and under the observer seat. The observer seat was directly behind the pilot. The controls were such that it was recommended on any new observer that we go to altitude and let them get a feel of the controls and things like that. So if something happened to the pilot they could make a controlled crash with it anyhow and could use the radios to put out an emergency call. It was powered with a Continental O-470 engine. We had the fix pitch props on them, the constant speed props.

LC: What was the speed of the aircraft at top?

RR: We flew at around eighty-five to ninety. It took off at about seventy with the armor plate in with a high-density altitude. Normally it would take off at about fifty-five, but we usually kept it on the ground a little longer there. You could, if you went on up to cruise power, you could maintain about ninety, ninety-five, but that reduced the time on
station. If you ran it about eighty-five percent power you could stay on station about four
hours.

LC: What was the fuel capacity?
RR: About twenty-eight gallons I think, or maybe it was twenty-eight gallons on
each wing. I don’t remember.

LC: How long could you stay in the air if you were just—I mean, what was
your—?
RR: At eighty to eighty-five percent power we could stay in the air about four
hours. Like I say you could cruise faster than that, but it reduced the time to about three
hours, three and half hours you could stay on station.

LC: Sure. Now you talked about the armor plating and that came up yesterday,
too. It made the aircraft heavier.

RR: It made the aircraft heavier. A lot of people took it off. When we were in
Pleiku I had the armor plate in the aircraft. Later when I moved to the coast I didn’t.

LC: Why was that? Why did you take it out?
RR: Just didn’t feel like I needed it there. I used a flight vest instead that weighed
about one tenth the weight of the armor plate.

LC: Describe a flight vest to us.
RR: It was just a vest that you wore to protect your body from flak, the upper
torso of the body.

LC: What was it made out of?
RR: Kevlar and some other stuff. It was very bulky, hot. Some people wore them.
Some didn’t. I wore mine.

LC: Roy, did you have any defensive weapons with you?
RR: No.

LC: Did you not carry a side arm or anything?
RR: Well we carried a 45 or a 38. Some had 38, some 45s. We had a survival
knife and that was it.

LC: What about other survival gear? Was there anything stowed in the plane that
you could have utilized—?
RR: I had a bag in the aircraft that had extra ammunition for the pistol. Later from the Air Force, I got a CAR-15. It’s a sawed off AR-15 and I carried it. I had it there and I carried extra ammunition for it with me.

LC: But that was non-standard obviously?

RR: It was non-standard. A lot of people had them, but.

LC: Did most of the guys sort of carry their own weapons?

RR: Yeah. Everybody had some type of survival. Main thing was, I think there was four or five canteens of water on the belt.

LC: Were those the quart-sized canteens, just the small ones?

RR: The small pint-sized.

LC: Pint-sized?

RR: Yeah.

LC: That’s not a lot of water really, is it?

RR: It’s not a lot of water, not to that kind of environment. Well, I guess none of us planned on going down.

LC: That’s right, yes, sir. Absolutely. It would be better to stay in the air.

RR: I realized a lot then, but it was small. You just didn’t have that much room in it. Flying for the support of the American troops, most of the time we had an observer with us, an artillery observer usually. We would adjust artillery and fly recon to particular areas that they were interested in.

LC: Now were there particular individual forward observers for the artillery that you may remember having flown with?

RR: No. I flew with so many I don’t remember. It was just almost everyday it was a different one. What happened, they had these gun positions at different base camps, not base camps but different tactical operation centers. You would pick up one, one day to adjust the artillery coming out of one area and the next day you wanted to pick to adjust artillery coming out of another area.

LC: So you met a lot of guys from artillery battery then?

RR: Right.

LC: I was going to ask what was your general impression of the forward observers and of the mission they were on. Was that helpful do you think?
RR: Oh, yeah, because without adjusting those guns—over there, there was no
way to have an observer up on the hill that made the adjustment for you. So having a
good adjustment on the guns and good reference they were able to go right into fire for
effect real quick if they had a unit in contact.

LC: Yeah, and help those guys out. Roy, did you know what you were looking
for as a recon pilot when you first got there?

RR: Well, no, you learn it. The first time that my first flight over there, this
captain carried me on an orientation flight to see if I was safe in the airplane. He went
down to the Special Forces camp at Plei Do Lim and he’s pointing out trails, hooches,
and roads. I’m seeing nothing.

LC: How long did it take for you to get your eye in as they say and get a sense of
what you were actually looking at?

RR: I would say about ten days to two weeks it started to come together. Then
the longer you flew the more it did, the more the picture began to form. Fortunately with
us we had assigned AOs (area of operation) that we flew everyday. It wasn’t long that
you started picking up changes in the trail, hooches that had been moved because the
Montagnards they would just take and move a village. They would just get underneath
the hooches and walk down the road with them. It wasn’t long till you started noticing
this and picking it up. Well, there used to be three hooches there and now there’s none.
This was a good indication that the Vietnamese north or south had moved into the area,
didn’t matter to the Montagnards because they would just move away from them.

LC: Do you remember the Special Forces person or personnel that you worked
with?

RR: Just by call signs is all.

LC: What was their call sign? Do you know?

RR: I can remember in Prong, in November of ’66 the Mike Force got cut off out
west of Pleiku. Doc was on the ground. I just remember Doc. We flew twenty-four-hour
radio relay until they could get relief forces in there. I remember a lieutenant or captain
that was with the Mike Force in Pleiku that the helicopters carried out to join them and
they put him down about three hundred meters from where the unit was. Right in the
middle of the NVA (North Vietnamese Army), but he walked in. How, I don’t know.
LC: When you say you flew a twenty-four-hour relay, can you describe what that operation really looks like?
RR: What it is, you keep an aircraft in the air continually. You time replacements so that the new aircraft has time to get on station before the old one goes off. You have one of your FM radios was receiving and the other one transmitting so it retransmits the data back to their home base there in Pleiku. At that particular time that’s where we were doing it.
LC: So about what altitude would you be flying on an operation like that?
RR: I was flying about twenty-five hundred feet. It’s like flying instruments over there. You have no towns or cities or anything to orientate yourself by. You’re flying in a little airplane that is not designed for instruments. It’s got a needle and ball and a compass and an altitude indicator. You’re trying to fly instruments in it because you’re flying at night, it’s pitch dark. All you do is you pick up a radio of the compass out of Pleiku and just try to stay on it. Fly time and distance and hope you’re not going out over Cambodia. There was no reference to know until you got back to Pleiku. It taxed your things that you had been taught. You had been taught time and distance and flying like this in flight school, but you never dreamed you would be doing it, or I didn’t.
LC: Roy, I want to ask you about your first contact with the enemy. In the materials that you submitted to us, you gave us the date of the sixth of October 1966. That would be right after you arrived. Do you remember that incident? Not really?
RR: Not really, no. That instance was really a sour grape.
LC: Okay. How do you mean?
RR: Well, I was flying with this captain from the company that did the orientation flights when you came in. They spotted these elephants and they said they were carrying supply for the NVA. They brought in gun ships and you could see the rockets being fired, bouncing off the elephants. Some of them weren’t even detonating. It just hit me the wrong way, firing at elephants. I mean an innocent animal. He’s trying to explain, “Well, they’re carrying arms. We have to stop them.” I don’t know, just some things were really sour grapes. That’s one of them.
LC: A little bit later on, I think in November, this is again from the information that you gave us—did you see a white soldier being marched by enemy troops at some point?

RR: Yes. It was on Highway 13. It was from Duc Co. It was right near the Cambodian border.

LC: What mission were you on that day, sir?

RR: I was just flying the visual recon. I had the area from the Chu Pongs to the border. From the Chu Pongs to the Duc Co Special Forces camp.

LC: What happened when you made that—first of all, how did you feel when you saw it and you knew what you were seeing?

RR: Helpless, totally helpless. I made the report to the Duc Co. He said they had a team near there and they tried to move the team. You call the 4th Division. Everybody’s tied up. War is frustrating because it seems like every time you really need help that everything is tied up somewhere else. It didn’t happen just once. It happened lots of times and not just to me. It seems that things happen and you just can’t get the help that you want at that time. Of course the help that I wanted might not been the right help to get at that time. I don’t know.

LC: Yes, sir. You did an important thing though don’t you think, in terms of seeing it, recognizing it?

RR: Oh, yeah. My job was to find it, report it.

LC: Yes, sir. Did you say that you had seen white soldiers who are clearly POWs (prisoner of war) or being held captive, did you see that more than once or was this the only time?

RR: Well, once before. Well, actually after that. It was in the November, in that Prong we saw two that were being held by the North Vietnamese just west of Plei Djereng right on the Cambodia border.

LC: Again, the same kind of frustration for you?

RR: It’s real frustrating because from that little airplane you can’t do anything. You can’t react. You don’t have a mobile force to put in. It’s you and an observer and sometimes not even an observer.

LC: Were you alone on the times that you saw these men?
RR: Well, the first one I was not. I had an observer from the oasis where the 3rd Brigade of the 25th was. I had an observer from there with me. They had an 8 millimeter mauser battery at Duc Co. The end of our mission was to adjust that artillery to verify the adjustment on their aiming points.

LC: Have you given any thought to those sightings that you had in the year subsequently?

RR: Oh, several times. There are a lot of things that you put them away for a while, but something will happen, it comes back. The Iraq situation brought a lot of memories back that you’ve kind of forgotten about. Filed them away for future reference, I guess.

LC: Did you feel that as you were in-country and doing your job for the first couple of months that you were actually getting pretty good at it? Did you feel an improvement in your own skills?

RR: Oh, definitely. The problem was the ground commanders I guess you’d say. The Special Forces knew how to use our skill. Some of the people had been in-country for a while did, but some of the new ones coming in did not realize the importance of the information they were getting. For instance, the night before Prong—and Prong was the first operation and I guess the only operation where they tried to integrate the Special Forces, the Mike Force and conventional forces into an operation. The night before it was to kick off I’m flying VR (visual reconnaissance) and at that time my recon area is the area west of Plei Djereng along the Cambodia border up toward the Plei Trap, the area of the Prong is going to jump into. I spotted about two hundred meters of cooking fires that night and anti-aircraft pits where the NVA were cooking supper, getting their rice and had their anti-aircraft pits out there ready. I did what I was supposed to do. I went to the Plei Djereng Special Forces camp, which was the nearest location and reported it there. He said he would report it to Pleiku, which that was where their headquarters were. I went to Plei Mrong to Mike Force, reported it to them and then I flew to the 4th Division and reported it to the G-3 there or G-2. He said, “Well, we’ll run a bright spot tonight and see what we get.” I’ve already seen them. They know I’ve seen them cooking so nobody’s going to have any fires going by the time they run a bright spot. So they run either—I don’t know if they run the Canberras through or some of the Army Mohawks.
Anyhow, they’re running. They didn’t get any return so they decided nothing was out there. The next day they dropped a Mike Force right in the middle of an NVA division and that’s where we went into the twenty-four-hour day radio relay.

LC: That’s when the Mike Force got cut off basically.

RR: Yes. They lost—well Americans total during that period of time lost about thirteen aircraft, helicopters, F-100s, O-1s. It ended up one of the major battles of the 4th Division.

LC: How did that affect you later on when you knew what a big engagement it had been and the heavy losses for the Americans?

RR: Well, I was upset because I had tried to tell them, “You’re dropping these people right in the middle.” They kept, “No, they’re over here.” They kept trying to put them east of there and said Mike Force is just going to be a blocking force. It was very evident from the VR, visual recon, that the NVA were right along the border. Like I say it was frustrating, but that’s the way it all worked out.

LC: You mentioned that after you made the visual observation of the fires you went to the Special Forces camp and then you went to a number of other places to report it. Do you mean that you actually put your aircraft down and went in?

RR: Yeah, I landed at those spots. They had short airfields at those spots.

LC: Why were you doing that rather than, for example, radioing in your information?

RR: Because I wanted them to see face to face the person that had made the observation. I wanted them to know it wasn’t some kid out there that just got in-country. That I was somebody that had been in the Army for more than ten years and was familiar with tactical operations.

LC: Did you think that your face-to-face sort of delivery would convey the urgency and importance?

RR: I thought it would, yes. You know there’s times in military, and I assume all of them, I know the Army, is so dead set on doing something and showing the world that they can do it that they are going to do it despite. This was one of those times that they were determined to have a joint operation between Special Forces and the Mike Force.
and the conventional forces. I think they would have done it if I’d spotted the NVA
division in the open.

LC: Just because they were ready to do something.

RR: They just told the world they were going to do this. “We’re going to do it for
the first time ever,” and they’re going to do it.

LC: Sir, you mentioned the bright spot. Can you describe what that was?

RR: What it is, is they run an infrared mission at night. If you have any cooking
fires or large vehicles running or stuff like this, it will give an infrared return to the
aircraft flying the mission. They was running it to confirm my sighting, but like I say,
I’ve already caught them in the open cooking and they’re not going to keep cooking.

LC: Yeah. Right. They heard you.

RR: They heard me. They saw me. I made the second pass to verify it and you
know they were caught.

LC: What aircraft would run that infrared inspections?

RR: They would use it in a Mohawk, an OV-1 Mohawk that the Army had or the
Air Forces Canberra. The Canberra bomber was set up to do those.

LC: Okay. On that particular night, was it the Army that ran the infrared?

RR: I don’t know who ran it. I was just told that they had run it and that they
didn’t find anything.

LC: Are there other incidents of nights when you made particular observations
that first tour of yours that you recall that you’d like to talk about?

RR: Well, not in the Pleiku area. What happened, right after Prong in November
of ’66—I guess it was late November. I had flown Martha Raye in my aircraft and
somebody else had flown her guitar player in the other aircraft out to Plei Djereng. I was
told that after I dropped them off to run to Plei Trap and that was that area west of Plei
Djereng, right on the Cambodian border. They said the 4th Division wanted an update on
any new AA pits or anything out in that area. I went out and I started flying it. I was right
on the Cambodian border when the world erupted around me. My aircraft was actually
thrown into Cambodia. What had happened is an arc light had come through, a B-12 run
had come through right to the right of me. I happened to be far enough into Cambodia
that I wasn’t where the bombs were actually hitting, but the shock wave from them hit the aircraft.

LC: At what altitude were you flying?
RR: About a thousand feet. I was about two hundred feet when I recovered the aircraft and actually flew it into Cambodia and south to get out of it.

LC: Describe what happened to the aircraft when you—
RR: The shock wave just—it’s just like something picking the aircraft up. It’s just like getting a big up draft. It just picked the aircraft up and moved it. Since the wave was moving away from where the bombs were hitting it just moved it into Cambodia. Then that pressure drops out from under it and then the aircraft starts dropping. It’s a sick feeling. It’s like hitting a big down draft. You go in at full power and it’s still going down. When I recovered I just flew back to the south and then back into Pleiku. They tell me—I don’t remember this, but they told me I was cussing everybody in II Corps all the way in and I probably was because I was scared. I thought that was it.

LC: About when did that happen?
RR: It was the last part of November. It was at the end of Prong so after the twentieth of November.

LC: In general was there very little coordination or no coordination?
RR: Nobody told me. Everybody knew it was coming. Fourth Division knew it was coming. The Special Forces knew it was coming, but no one told me.

LC: So you’re just up there flying around on your mission and—
RR: They just let me go right on with the VR. They requested the VR knowing that they had an arc light coming out there. It was a break down in communications. As a result I was not very happy with the 4th and everybody else. So the company moved me to Tuy Hoa on the coast.

LC: When did you get that transfer?
RR: I moved in December of that year.

LC: Before we talk about Tuy Hoa and the operations that you ran up there, you mentioned that you flew Martha Raye around.
RR: We flew her to all the little Special Forces camps to put on her show.
LC: So over a period of how long were you working with her and flying her?
RR: From the time I got in-country until I went to Tuy Hoa.

LC: About how many flights did you make with her?

RR: I made two with her. Somebody in our unit flew her somewhere nearly everyday. She would stay one or two days at one of the camps and then move onto another one.

LC: What was your impression of her?

RR: She was a lot of fun and a lot of encouragement to the people over there. She was going into places that nobody got shows. She was going right out into the boondocks, into the Special Forces camps.

LC: Did you ever form an impression about why she was doing that? I mean, she wasn’t staying with the big USO (United Service Organizations) shows, I mean although she did that as well, but what was driving her?

RR: She just said she wanted to entertain those that nobody else was entertaining.

LC: Did you admire her for that?

RR: Oh, yeah, definitely.

LC: Was she a tough gal?

RR: She was tough. She was tough. Her guitar player was tough. Her side kick was tough. They made her an honorary member of the Special Operations Association and she deserved it. She earned it.

LC: Can you describe either of the two places that you had with her and did you have a chance to actually talk with her much?

RR: Oh, I had dinner with her in the club, drank whiskey with her.

LC: Drank whiskey with her.

RR: Shot dice with her. She was a good dice player. Don’t ever play—I won’t say that, but anyhow. She was lucky.

LC: Was she a good whiskey drinker as well?

RR: Oh, yeah. She never lost sight of what she was trying to do and her goal was to try to put on a show at every Special Forces camp in the country.

LC: Do you think she pretty much made that goal?
RR: I think she accomplished it. I really think she accomplished it. I respect her for it because it takes a lot of guts to get out there. I didn’t want to spend the night in some of those camps that she stayed in.

LC: Where did you guys go to the club and have—?  
RR: At Camp Holloway in Pleiku. That’s where the 219th Headquarters was at, Camp Holloway.

LC: Then what, the next day you flew her around?
RR: She’d come in. She might spend a couple days in Holloway and get cleaned up and get her clothes cleaned up. Then she would go to one of the other camps. She might hit a couple of camps, come back to Holloway for a couple of days and just moved around like that. One of our aircraft from Kontum, the platoon up there, would pick her up and carry her up to Dak To. Then she’d come back to Holloway a few days and then go out again.

LC: How many people was she traveling with?  
RR: Just herself and one musician.

LC: Do you remember his name?
RR: No, I don’t. I wished I did, but I don’t.

LC: Did you fly him at any point?
RR: I never flew him. Some others in the company did.

LC: Along the way, Roy, did you meet other similarly famous people? Did you see any other people whose names might ring a bell?
RR: Jayne Mansfield and her accompaniment was there.

LC: Was that when you were up in Tuy Hoa?
RR: No, that was at Pleiku. That was still at Pleiku. They came in and was touring some of the Special Forces camps also.

LC: Did you fly anybody from that entourage?
RR: No, I did not. Some people in 1st Platoon did, but I didn’t. They were staying at the Pleiku Air Force Base rather than Holloway. I had seen them, their little show that they had put on over there but that was all.

LC: Did you have a chance to talk to any of the people in her group?
RR: No, I didn’t.
LC: When you moved up to Tuy Hoa did your circumstances improve a little bit in terms of your happiness with who you were working with?

RR: Oh, yeah. In Tuy Hoa I was working strictly with the advisory team and the Vietnamese and the Special Forces camps in that area. There was one brigade, the 3rd Brigade of the 4th Division was there initially when I first got there. My first assignment was flying for Cung Son Special Forces camp doing some visual recon for them.

LC: Now are you still in the 6th Platoon or have you moved?

RR: No. I’m now within the 3rd Platoon.

LC: First of all, where were you living?

RR: We were living right on the beach in Tuy Hoa. We were right at the province headquarters. We were within a rock throwing distance of the province headquarters. All the advisors for the Phu Yen province and 47th ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) Division all lived there in that compound.

LC: Can you describe your billet there?

RR: They were kind of a, I guess you’d say ranch style stucco buildings, tin roofs, but two men to a room, about a twelve by eighteen foot room. Common shower areas, a couple common shower areas there. One group of them were right on the beach itself and then there was three other lines of billets that came back from the beach.

LC: Were the guys in your building all other pilots in the platoon?

RR: No. Actually, the one that I was in the room with was the S-2 advisor for the Phu Yen province.

LC: Now by S-2 you mean?

RR: G-2, intelligence advisor. He was an intelligence analyst.

LC: But he was U.S. Army I take it?

RR: Yeah, U.S. Army. We had U.S. Army and Navy SEALs (Sea, Air, Land) and Air Force FACs (forward air controller) there.

LC: Do you remember that G-2’s name?

RR: No.

LC: Was it a good billet basically?
RR: Compared to what I had been in previously, yes. At Pleiku we had tin frames and they were partially covered. These were permanent buildings that had been built there.

LC: Did you get any time over at the beach?
RR: We could go to the beach anytime. It was just right outside the door, but it wasn’t recommend unless you were a good swimmer and had a good line.

LC: Why was that?
RR: Because there was a lot of undertows in the South Pacific there. There was a lot of undertows there on the beach.

LC: Now were there other facilities at Tuy Hoa that you were able to take advantage of, like recreational facilities or anything?
RR: No. That was it. The compound was it. Now we went right through the city of Tuy Hoa every time to the airfield. It was on the other side of town. We had to go right through town to get to the airfield.

LC: Now your mission profiles within the 3rd Platoon, were they essentially the same as what you had been doing before?
RR: It was still the same. We still had our assigned areas of visual recon that we made each day.

LC: You were in support of which unit?
RR: The Cung Son Special Forces camp, the Dong Tre Special Forces camp, the 3rd Brigade of the 4th Division and then the districts within the province, the ARVN 47th Division.

LC: Were you also supporting South Vietnamese Special Forces working with U.S. Special Forces?
RR: Right. At the Special Forces camp you just had the American advisors and then there was all their troopers were South Vietnamese.

LC: Did you have much contact with South Vietnamese forces, either Provincial Forces or their Special Forces or ARVN?
RR: Of course there in Tuy Hoa I had contact with the province staff all the time, their G-3, G-2 and members of their staff. There was a Lieutenant Ba who was in the intelligence there that was one of the observers that flew with us quite often.
LC: Speaking of Lieutenant Ba specifically, what kind of impression did you form of him?

RR: Very proficient. He was really a proficient individual. He had none of the traits that I heard a lot of others talk about that they saw in the Vietnamese officers. It was just the opposite.

LC: Such as what kinds of things?

RR: He took pride in his dress. He took pride in his performance of his duty. He was never hesitant to make a decision. I mean, when something was said he made a decision immediately.

LC: How long did you stay at Tuy Hoa?

RR: Until I rotated out in October.

LC: So for the rest of the year you were based there?

RR: Right.

LC: Did you ever go on any civic action programs while you were at Tuy Hoa?

RR: Yeah, with the Tuy Hoa district, when the Trung Duy there, we taught some of his district people how to raise vegetables for us. We had a problem. Highway One was always closed and our airfield wasn’t big enough to accommodate large airplanes. When we got produce it was usually rotten. So working with one of the guys from USAID (United States Agency for International Development) and with seed that we received from churches in the States we taught a couple of his farmers how to raise vegetables for us.

LC: The churches in the States, do you know where they were or how that program was organized?

RR: Well, part of it was here in Tahoka, First Baptist Church here in Tahoka, and other churches here in Tahoka. They called it Friends of Veterans from Lynn County.

LC: Were you instrumental in setting that up?

RR: I just asked them to send me some seed. I had a little place out at the airfield, started growing vegetables out there.

LC: So this was kind of your project in a way?

RR: Well, it was a lot of our projects. I won’t take credit for it. I was just a participant in it.
LC: The group in Tahoka, what was their name?
RR: Friends of Veterans, Lynn County Friends of Veterans.
LC: Who was involved in that? Who did you actually write to ask them to get the seeds together for you?
RR: Lynn County Friends of Veterans.
LC: Okay. So they already existed?
RR: Yeah. They had sent me a package at Christmas time. That’s all it said. It had cookies and candy and a card, a couple of books, you know, and things. I had written back to thank them and I said if anybody had any garden seed left that they didn’t use if they would send it to me I was going to plant me a little garden at the airfield.
LC: How long did it take for some seeds to get to you?
RR: About two weeks.
LC: What did they send you?
RR: We got some radishes, and turnips, mustard, lettuce and onions. Then we got tomatoes and peppers, and a lot of things that we didn’t have very good luck with.
LC: Was this a one-time thing where they sent the seeds over just the one time?
RR: Yeah because USAID was able to get some seed through their program after that.
LC: I see. Was USAID, the personnel from that office, were they involved at the get go or did they kind of see that you had something going that maybe they should—?
RR: They kind of got into it after we got started out at the airfield. Saw what we were doing. We brought in a bunch of lettuce and radishes that we had harvested to the mess hall or dining hall. The sergeant there had put them out. Everybody wanted to know where they came from and he told them. It kind of grew from there. It was kind of a fun thing to do.
LC: Totally, and a smart thing as well. Did this make you kind of popular there, Roy?
RR: Oh, yeah. We were popular anyhow because we had our own well out there. We had a little pump on it. We could wash vehicles.
LC: Oh, is that right? Did you have a little business going out there?
RR: No, we just washed our own vehicles, aircraft and things. We dug our own well. We hand dug a well. The water was shallow enough, we could hand dig a well.

LC: About how far down did you have to go?

RR: About twenty feet.

LC: That’s still—with a shovel that’s still a pretty good dig.

RR: We just used buckets. We saw those movies of how they used to do it in the Old West so we just copied them.

LC: Now who’s we? You and who?

RR: The crew chiefs there at the airfield.

LC: Were these guys kind of becoming your buddies?

RR: Well, they kept our airplanes in the air.

LC: Right. So they were already important.

RR: We were very dependent on them.

LC: Do you remember any of those guys’ names?

RR: No, I wish I did.

LC: So the farming thing went on through the whole of 1966 or ’67—

RR: Yeah and then it continued after that.

LC: So somebody picked it up and kind of kept it going?

RR: Yeah, the district continued it after that.

LC: When it started off, right after you got the seeds from back here in Texas, about how much area did you plant?

RR: Oh, we had a little area about fifteen by fifteen, fifteen feet by fifteen feet, there at the airfield. We could water it in the dry season. You don’t think about watering in Vietnam, but you have to during the dry season.

LC: Was this something fun that kind of kept your interest up?

RR: It kept everybody’s interest up, just something different to do. The worst thing in combat, and I’m sure nothing has changed, is boredom. You just need little things to occupy your mind and change your direction of thought for a little while.

LC: Sir, speaking of that, did you or any of the guys that you were living with or flying with have any pets?

RR: I had a monkey.
LC: You personally had a monkey?
RR: Yeah. It was given to me by one of the companies from the 3rd Brigade of the 4th Division.
LC: Why did he give him to you?
RR: Because I was covering. They were surrounded and I was covering combat observation, brought in some helicopters to give them some support. They caught the monkey in the process of that mission and brought it back with them. He gave it to me. I called him Columbus.
LC: Why did you name him Columbus?
RR: Because he didn’t know where he had been, he didn’t know where he was, and he didn’t know where he was going.
LC: Was he a good monkey?
RR: Yeah, he was a good monkey. He liked to fly. He liked to sit up on my shoulder and fly.
LC: You took him in the plane with you?
RR: Yeah. First time I just taxied around to see how he was going to react. I didn’t just take off into the air. Then I flew around the pattern to make sure everything was going to be okay. He loved to fly, but he didn’t like Vietnamese.
LC: He didn’t like Vietnamese people?
RR: Vietnamese could get within twenty feet of him and he would start yelling. I always knew if a Vietnamese was coming near me.
LC: It was like your own personal radar.
RR: He was my bodyguard.
LC: Was there any bureaucratic problems on you taking the monkey on the plane with you?
RR: Nobody ever said anything. When I got down there they made me the operations officer. I made the schedules.
LC: Oh, I didn’t know that. So you were in charge.
RR: I had a captain that didn’t like to fly and he just says, “It’s yours.”
LC: Where did Columbus live?
RR: I built a cage that was—part of it was in the room and part of it was out so
that he could move in and out of the room.
LC: Did he do okay in the cage?
RR: Yeah.
LC: What kind of stuff did you feed him, stuff from the garden?
RR: I fed him bananas, papayas, peanuts, any kind of vegetable, you know,
uncooked vegetable.
LC: Did he just domesticate fairly easily then?
RR: Yeah. He seemed to like it.
LC: What kind of monkey was he?
RR: He was a little small, about eleven, twelve inches tall, brown.
LC: He sounds sweet.
RR: He got pneumonia. I had to go to Doc Tho in August, I guess it was August
of ’66. Right before I went home, August and September. He got pneumonia up there.
The medics, they tried everything. They had him in the oxygen tent. He couldn’t get over
it.
LC: How did he actually contract that, do you know?
RR: I don’t know. He just came down wheezing. I had the doc check him out and
he said he had pneumonia.
LC: Now did you have a human doc check him out or a vet?
RR: Yeah, a human doc. As far as I know there were no vets there. I didn’t know
of any.
LC: They put him in an oxygen tent?
RR: Yeah.
LC: So they really tried to help him.
RR: They really tried to help him.
LC: I’m sorry. He sounds like an amazing little guy.
RR: He was. He was a lot of fun.
LC: Were there other people who had pets? I can’t imagine anything as
interesting as Columbus.
RR: Well, one of the sergeants had a dog that stayed at the airfield. He was one of these dogs that knows everybody that is supposed to be there and those that’s not. I’ve never seen him bite anybody, but he would stand them off if anybody that wasn’t supposed to be there or hadn’t been around came near. He’d just roll those lips back and growl and stop them.

LC: Was he a fairly menacing dog when he wanted to be?
RR: He didn’t bother us, just bothered strangers.

LC: That’s interesting. Were you there when the sergeant rotated out?
RR: No, he was still there when I left.

LC: Because I gather from other statements by vets that they would hand their pet on to the next one.
RR: Yeah. They had to because it was just almost impossible to get one out of country.

LC: Yeah, exactly. I want to ask, Roy, I want to ask your impressions about enemy weaponry. You were flying pretty low most of the time. Did you ever encounter more than side arm fire? Did you ever actually get shot at with anti aircraft?
RR: In Tuy Hoa. They tried to overrun the airfield there at Tuy Hoa. In late ’66, it was before I left. I don’t know, it was—one of my Distinguished Flying Crosses was for that period of time. They were firing something at me and I have no idea what it was. I was getting airbursts around the aircraft. The dai uy on the ground, he was telling me to get out of there because of it. They just continued to burst one off around the airplane and I don’t know what they were flying or what they were firing.

LC: Did you take some damage?
RR: Just some small, nothing major, just small stuff.

LC: Now did you say that by this time you had taken the armor plating out from the seat?
RR: Yeah. I had.

LC: Did that turn out to be such a great idea?
RR: Yeah. I still—the aircraft just handled so much easier, smoother. You were able to do so much more with it.

LC: How much weight did that armor plating actually add?
RR: About five hundred pounds.

LC: Really?

RR: You’d see the gears on the airplanes where the (inaudible) it and the gear was actually spread from the weight of it. If you took the side plates off, I think there was still about 125 pounds. That’s almost the weight of a passenger. It was a small aircraft. It really made a difference.

LC: The day that you came under this attack, the Tuy Hoa airfield was also under attack.

RR: One more village, and they were at the airfield. They were that close to the airfield.

LC: In what concentration of strength? Do you know?

RR: It was probably a company sized battalion, battalion at greatest, but I’m more in the opinion it was a company sized operations.

LC: How was it that you came to get the aircraft up in the air that day? Was that the order to get the aircraft up?

RR: I could see the fight going on outside the airfield area. I could see it out in the valley. They called in from province and said that the dai uy was pinned down in this village and he couldn’t tell where the fire was coming, didn’t know which way to go. So I went up to look at what was going on and direct him around. I found out where their fire was coming from, the automatic fire. They had them pinned down from where it was coming from and we put some artillery in on it. I gave him an alternate route to get around. In the end they—they ended up they took, I think, eighteen prisoners that day or something like that, killed some. I’m not sure what the friendly losses were.

LC: You were awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for your actions that day?

RR: Right.

LC: Who put that citation through?

RR: He did, the captain that was the advisor to the ARVN group that was on the ground.

LC: What particularly was the award made for if you can say?

RR: For me staying there while I was taking airbursts and stayed on the ground until I made sure that his unit was safe.
LC: Roy, did you get another Distinguished Fighting Cross?
RR: Yes I did.
LC: Was that also while you were at Tuy Hoa?
RR: Yeah, Tuy Hoa.
LC: About what time did that happen?
RR: It was earlier in that same year, earlier in ’66. The captain from the Cung Son Special Forces camp carried a unit into a village south of the river. There was one he would never gone into if it hadn’t been for me because I kept talking about that the trails were getting wider and the traffic was just continuously in and out of there. Anyhow he had been killed. Well, at that time we didn’t know he was killed. He had been taken prisoner.

LC: This is who again?
RR: A captain from the Special Forces Camp at Cung Son. I was taking ground fire, but I was trying to keep up with where the NVA were at. I got helicopters there and put helicopter gun ship fire in on them. The team, as they were recovering his body, he was already dead when they recovered his body.

LC: Can you describe what exactly you did that day?
RR: Well, I just got on station and located where the enemy fire was coming from and where the friendlies were and got gunships on call. I put out a mayday call. I didn’t go through channels. I just put out any gun ships in Tuy Hoa area I need you. About that time they came back and told me they were lifting off from the beach. That was where they rearmed at south of the river. When they got up there I pointed out the position of the friendlies and the position of the North Vietnamese and directed them in.

LC: On that day, about what altitude were you flying?
RR: A thousand feet probably at the most.
LC: Who put you through for that citation?
RR: The Special Forces camp.
LC: Were those your two Distinguished Flying Crosses? Did you get another one?
RR: Yeah. That was it.
LC: But you did get a number of other awards.
RR: Yes.
LC: Can you just describe or name the other ones that you did earn?
RR: I got the Army Commendation Medal, the Bronze Star Medal, the Air
Medal. It’s a thirty-seven oak leaf clusters. I guess in Vietnam that was it.
LC: Sir, what was the Bronze Star awarded to you for?
RR: For meritorious service in combat.
LC: Was there a particular incident?
RR: No, no incident, just while I was there. Same as the ARCOM (Army
Commendation Medal), it was just for service while I was there.
LC: Sir, you mentioned taking fire in the later incident when Tuy Hoa itself was
under attack. I wonder whether you ever had an aircraft disabled while you were flying it.
RR: Well, not totally disabled. I was able to get on the ground.
LC: When did that happen?
RR: There was one in Prong. I took a round through the oil pan and I knew that I
lost all pressure. Solar head temperature was going up. It quit on me on short final and I
was able to get it on the end of the runway. Then it’s an embarrassing thing to do, but I
was out pushing it off the runway and they all thought I had run out of gas. They was all
laughing at me running out of gas, but it had quit on me.
LC: Did you set them straight, sir?
RR: I set them straight after they got out of their helicopters.
LC: Very good. Throughout your first tour you were never actually shot down
anywhere?
RR: No. I was very fortunate.
LC: Yes, sir. Were there men in the 219th while you were there who were?
RR: There was a Lieutenant Linderman and a Chief Warrant Officer Thomas that
lost their life. They were shot down or went down as a result of enemy action. There was
one other one, but I can’t remember the name. He was not in my platoon so I don’t
remember his name.
LC: The other two that you mentioned though were in the—?
RR: Yeah. Thomas had come down to Tuy Hoa to fly for us during that period of
time when they were trying to overrun the valley to give us an extra aircraft. He didn’t
want to go back to Pleiku, but we had to send him back. I think two days after he went back he was lost.

LC: Why did he not want to go back up there? Do you remember?
RR: He wanted to stay where he was at. He didn’t want to go back. He just had bad feelings about it.

LC: Did stuff like that happen where guys would get a bad feeling?
RR: All the time. One of the first things that happened is this one wife had this feeling of her husband not going. She was begging everybody not to send him. He was sent to a Mohawk unit just south of the river where we was at in Tuy Hoa. His first mission he went down. Things like that all the time, people just have premonitions.

LC: Right. Sir, did you have any feelings about whether you were going to get through this tour all right or not? Did any feeling ever come to you?
RR: No.

LC: Either positively like, “Yes, I’m going to be fine,” or not?
RR: I just never approached it. With everyday I was just going to do the best I could and do it.

LC: Just do your job.
RR: I think you just ask for trouble if you start dwelling on what might happen. You just have to take everything as it comes.

LC: On the—I hate to use this word because it’s not really fair—but the standard VR missions that you would fly, about what altitude were you generally flying? Did you ever get a change of orders around the typical altitudes to be flying?
RR: I liked to fly most of the time around a thousand, twelve hundred feet. For surprise purposes sometimes I would come into an area that was of particular interest at two hundred feet or so, not to remain there very long but just as a surprise. Caught a lot of people in the open that way and especially when they were expecting me to come from the airfield in. If I sneak up north and came through the valleys and came from the continent in, different direction in you were always catching people moving.

LC: In general, when you made an observation like that, would you then radio that to the particular—?
RR: They had what they called eagle flights for a while. Both the Koreans, White Horse Division and the 3rd Brigade of the 4th. In a little while we had the 101st brigades there, but anyhow you could call for an eagle flight and they would send a flight, a platoon, or a squad or whatever out.

LC: For somebody who didn’t know what eagle flight was what would you tell them?

RR: This is the group that’s on stand by at the airfield ready to full pitch. They are ready to go.

LC: This is foot patrol people?

RR: A foot unit, a ground unit that’s ready to go in. They have with them armed helicopters, gun ships to escort them in. They were there for just such missions. A lot of our VRs were for that purpose was to locate targets of opportunity for the eagle flights. They would come in. Well, they would call and ask who was flying. If I was flying their boss wouldn’t take off. The senior military advisor for the Phu Yen province wouldn’t take off.

LC: Why is that?

RR: Because they knew the eagle flights were going out. I don’t know. I hated it. I did not like the role I had, but I was always finding people in the open.

LC: You flew over five hundred missions. Is that right, sir?

RR: Yeah.

LC: You had what you would say in the jobs that you were assigned to was a lot of success actually.

RR: It was a lot of success.

LC: And locating enemy concentration.

RR: I had the advantage over most of the pilots because I had ten years of military service behind me. Map reading was just automatic to me. Knowing where I was at was automatic to me. Being able to identify different features in the terrain was just an automatic thing, something that I’ve been doing all my life.

LC: Right. Sir, I think in the form that you sent in you mentioned that you did go over Laos.
RR: Yes, that was in my second—well, that was in my—when I told you that I went to Dak To in August?
LC: Yes.
RR: We were sent up thirty days to fly in support of a MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam) SOG (special operations group) one side up there.
LC: By SOG, what do you mean?
RR: The special operations group. It was people doing cross-border operations. It was so secret that it wasn’t until a few years ago that they even released information about the unit.
LC: This is in the summer of 1967?
RR: August ’67.
LC: Sir, what missions were you flying?
RR: We were flying the—they were launching these teams, small teams, into Laos there at the tri-border area. Our job was, if the team leader requested it, was to provide a recon of the launch sight, possible landing sights, anything that he wanted to do. I mean it was just whatever he wanted and to provide stand off. “This is what we mean. We’re not on the border. We’re flying back away from the border, but stand off radio relay.” We did that until they got in the satellite equipment where they could communicate through the satellite systems.
LC: Where they could set up their own system on the ground?
RR: Yeah, but at the time we were doing it none of that equipment was available at that time. They were using a little bit of it up north, the patrols going into North Vietnam, but it hadn’t filtered into that far south yet.
LC: Were you still assigned at this point to the 3rd Platoon?
RR: Yes. I was just TDY up there, temporary duty.
LC: How did you get selected for this? Do you know?
RR: Just that they called me and told me to report there and bag and baggage to stay for thirty days.
LC: Did you actually stay at Dak To camp?
RR: Yes, stayed at Dak To, stayed with the teams.
LC: Do you remember the atmosphere? You guys are doing something that nobody is really supposed to know about. First of all, did you know that it was a secret mission?
RR: Oh, yeah. I was told you don’t talk about it ever, for the rest of your life.
LC: General Singlaub came out several years after Vietnam and finally went public with the operation.
LC: Was he actually commanding?
RR: He was the one that formed SOG.
LC: Did you attend a briefing by him?
RR: No. I was at his Special Operations reunion in Las Vegas when he came and spoke to the group and said that he had gone public. In fact he went public at that meeting. That was him going public. After that he went public at other places.
LC: What year did you attend that meeting in Las Vegas?
RR: I went out there several different times.
LC: I gather that’s where the Special Forces Association met.
RR: The Special Ops units and Navy SEALs, Army Special Forces, Marine Force Recon, all of them that were involved in Special Operation type missions.
LC: Are you a member of that association, just out of curiosity?
RR: Yes.
LC: You were up there up for a month I think you said and you flew some fifty flights or so. Can you describe the average, for as long as you were there, the average day? Were there any particular incidents you remember in your missions?
RR: Well, the biggest thing was teams going in and they were compromised almost immediately and trying to locate landing sights, advise them on the ground, and the helicopters coming in on landing sights to pick them up to get them out.
LC: Why were they compromised so quickly?
RR: They had run into North Vietnamese units. It was just one of those things that happened quite often.

LC: The NVA units were camped just on the other side of the border?

RR: Yeah, they were all over Laos and Cambodia.

LC: So would you say the SOG teams that were going in were confronted by enemy troops almost immediately?

RR: A lot of them were. A lot of them they managed to stay several days and avoid contact. Sometimes best plans go wrong on you.

LC: Right. Did you ever fly support of actual troops in contact during this time period?

RR: Yes.

LC: Do you remember that and can you tell me anything about it?

RR: Well, they were just under heavy automatic weapons fire. It was coming from a hillside, real rugged terrain. We were trying to point out where the automatic fire was coming from in relation to their position so that they could try to isolate it and move out. Every time they would try to move, the automatic weapons fire was pinning them down again.

LC: I assume that they were limited as to what support they could call in to deal with that.

RR: At that time we were very limited, weak. Any support that we got was purely unauthorized. It never happened.

LC: Okay. So they couldn’t call in, for example, artillery?

RR: That was outside of artillery range. If the gun ships responded it was truly, definitely an unauthorized thing.

LC: Were there helicopters that were part of the SOG?

RR: They were flown by the Air America crews, Chinese, most of them were Chinese.

LC: The pilots of the helicopters?

RR: Yeah, the helicopters that dropped them in and picked them up.

LC: Okay. What actual types of helicopter were they using?

RR: I think they were H-34s.
LC: When the mission ended for you after thirty days or so, did the SOG operations continue or was it—?

RR: Oh, yeah. It continued up until ’75.

LC: Who was it, Roy, who told you—do you remember who told you that you were not supposed to talk about this?

RR: That was our briefing when we first got there.

LC: Do you remember who gave the briefing?

RR: It was just a major. We had to sign an immediate death after—(laughs).

LC: Right. Yes, sir. How many guys were TDY up there with you on the same kind of mission?

RR: Just me.

LC: Just you?

RR: One aircraft at a time.

LC: Do you know who replaced you?

RR: Lieutenant Butler replaced me.

LC: Was he from the same platoon?

RR: Same unit. Different platoon but same unit.

LC: Oh, okay. From what platoon was he from, do you know?

RR: I think he was from 1st Platoon, but I’m not absolutely certain.

LC: After that TDY up there you were getting pretty short, I guess. Were you counting the amount of time you had left in-country?

RR: Definitely. It was time to go home. After being over in Laos and Cambodia and most of II Corps it was time to find other places.

LC: Did you continue to fly pretty much right up until you rotated out?

RR: Yes, I did.

LC: When was your last flight?

RR: The day before I left.

LC: Really? What kind of a flight was it?

RR: It was a visual recon of the area around Dong Tre Special Forces camp.

LC: Was it an exciting flight? Did anything happen?
RR: No, it was kind of a routine VR. All my exciting flights had happened earlier.

LC: How did you feel on that? You knew that it was probably the last recon flight that you were going to take. Were you nervous or were you relieved?

RR: I was pleased. I felt like I had done what I had to do. It had kind of messed my life up, but I had done what I was trained to do.

LC: By messed your life up do you mean your private life?

RR: Well, everything. Things happened while I was there that really, even to this day, really bother me. You know you can put them away, but they always come back.

LC: In general—

RR: Well, there was three instances that happened. The first happened with the company of the 4th Division. There is a lake north of Tuy Hoa, fairly good-sized lake. This platoon was crossing the lake and was going to come into Tinh Long village. They had information that there was a Vietnamese paymaster there and a small group of—a North Vietnamese paymaster—and a small group of people. They took fire. In a rubber raft they took fire in the middle of the lake. I flew up at their request. I was called and directed artillery into the area the fire was coming from. I could see it. I mean you could see the green tracers coming out left and right and toward the boats. When the unit got on the ground, well, all they found was the dead women and children. That bothered me.

One night the same company, well, the whole battalion was camped out near Dong Tre. It was on the side of Highway 6 and the railroad there. They had let this bunch of girls with baskets of fruit into the perimeter. The baskets of fruits had baskets of grenades underneath them. They started throwing grenades and they had, I think, eighteen wounded and nine KIA (killed in action). It was lousy. The weather was lousy, might have had four hundred feet, I don’t know. I had flown up there and was trying to direct the dust off then and they couldn’t find the entrance into the valley because you had to find that entrance where Highway 6 left Highway 1 or you would never get in because there’s hills all along the coast. So they decided to bring them out in armored personnel carriers. They got onto the highway and they command detonated. The mines blew both of the carriers.

LC: About how many of our guys?
RR: Total, now, we had eighteen KIAs now after blowing that up. Sometimes you feel like everything you do, you’re just helpless. That same period of time when they were operating there, I was out one night. Dong Tre Special Forces camp had come under fire. I was out locating where the fire was coming from and directing their little artillery piece and mortar pieces and fired in there, a little counter fire. Heard this helicopter, they were lost. I sat and listened to the Tuy Hoa radio give them right turn, left let, right turn, trying to identify the helicopter with a radar, which is almost impossible until they ran out of fuel and went in. If they would have just told them to fly west, at least they would have been over land and had a chance. If they happened to be over water, well, there’s no chance at all.

LC: By telling him to do the zigzag they—
RR: They just burned all their fuel up. A helicopter doesn’t have that much fuel.
LC: That’s right and they were out over the ocean then?
RR: Apparently. The crew thought they were. They didn’t know for sure. They thought they were over water. If you got somebody over water you know that land is west, fly west.

LC: Things that you’re describing started to pile up on you.
RR: Yeah. I started drinking and I drank for a number of years. I’ve been sober now since July of ’91.

LC: Did you start kind of relieving things with alcohol while you were still over in-country?
RR: I started drinking after that incident on the lake. I got drunk that night and I think I was drunk every night after that.
LC: It was pretty easy to get booze too, yeah?
RR: Yeah. It was everywhere.

LC: Did you also observe that guys, if they wanted to, could get drugs at all?
RR: Well, you know what? I didn’t see that much of it my first tour. I don’t remember seeing anybody with drugs my first tour. In the units I was living, the locations I were now it could have been going on, but I did not see it. I didn’t see it until my second tour.
LC: Well, when you left Vietnam, so you had that last flight and then you were getting ready to rotate out. Where did you go?

RR: I went to Fort Stewart, Georgia, to the U.S. Army Aviation school element. That was where their fixed wing flight training center.

LC: How did you feel the day you were flying out of country? Do you remember?

RR: Relieved. Relieved. I was ready to go. I mean, you reach a point that you’ve run out of energy.

LC: What about the other guys on the flight that you were on? Do you remember that mood?

RR: Some were crying, some were yelling, and some were just kind of sitting in a trance. It was kind of mixed emotions.

LC: Did you have any kind of break before you reported to Fort Stewart?

RR: I had thirty days leave.

LC: What did you do?

RR: I visited my family in Texas and found out that at Fort Stewart they didn’t have housing. So I shopped around. I had to purchase a mobile home from the factory and had it shipped in down there.

LC: Did you have a lot to put it on?

RR: I worked out a deal with a gentleman that was just outside of town on the way to Savannah. He had a bunch of big ol’ pecan trees and oak trees out in the pasture. I worked out a deal with him to put it out there.

LC: Well, that sounds peaceful.

RR: I think finally he let about five others in there. Mine was the first one in.

LC: So you just kind of talked him into it?

RR: Yeah. I stopped and asked him. I told him who I was and I said, “Would you consider letting somebody put a mobile home right out there?” He said, “If I don’t have to pay for the sewage.” I said, “Well, I’d pay to put the septic tanks in if you’d let me put it out there.” He said, “I don’t know what I oughta charge you.”

LC: What did he end up charging?

RR: He charged me $25 a month.
LC: That’s pretty good. That’s a deal.
RR: They had catfish tanks and everything behind me, had a garden.
LC: You grew stuff again?
RR: Yeah. That’s my stress reliever.
LC: Yes, sir. I was going to ask you does that give you some peace?
RR: Yeah. Different people had different things. Mine is gardening.
LC: You arrived in October there.
RR: Yes. Well, actually the first of November when I was reported for duty.
LC: Okay. I see. What were you assigned to do there?
RR: Well, Colonel Richardson, who was that same battalion commander that said he needed fixed wing drivers, he was now the director of fixed wing training. He said, “Roy,” he says, “I’m going to ask a favor of you again.” I said, “What’s that sir?” He said, “I’m short instructors in academics. I need some academic instructors. Everybody wants to fly.” I said, “I’ll go wherever you need me, sir.” So I ended up teaching aviation weather.
LC: Were you ready to do that or did you have to kind of read in on it?
RR: I had to study to get ready. I got ready.
LC: Tell me about how the classes were structured and what exactly you were teaching guys.
RR: When they came in we went through the flight school program. Part of the academic instruction was climatology and weather, which was a fifteen-hour block. We taught them everything from basic cloud formation to basic climatology, how terrain effects, terrain and wind effects weather and things that you can look out for when you’re out there as an Army pilot and don’t have a forecaster around to talk to.
LC: Now the students you were teaching were training to do what?
RR: Fixed wing training. They were going through primary flight training, just like I had back a year or so earlier.
LC: At this point you’re not only substantially older than most of those guys I’m sure, but you’d also had a tour.
RR: I had a tour in Vietnam. I could apply what I was teaching to Vietnam and situations, the fog, flying in low visibility range, things like this. How the weather there
was effected by the—like on the coast, the mountains right at the coastline, the valley’s
inland. You know what it was all like. I could associate it.

LC: Did you bring that in for the guys to have some real world as well as the
textbook?
RR: Yeah.
LC: Did you enjoy the teaching, sir?
RR: Oh, yeah. I was instructor of the year. I was the Army Aviation School
instructor of the year.
LC: Really? Woah. How did that happen? Were you just really good or did
somebody like you?
RR: Well, I tried to do my best. Throughout my Army career I tried to do my
best.
LC: Did that make you feel good that you got that commendation?
RR: Oh, definitely. I was nominated. They had this team from Fort Rucker that
went around and they monitored your classes, and they rated you. The students that went
through, they rated you. Somehow it was all compiled to come up with who got the most
points. I got the ones for—it would have been—1968, the instructor of the year award.
LC: What did they give you? Was there a ceremony?
RR: It was just a letter and a plaque and I have no idea what happened to the
plaque.
LC: No bump in pay or anything?
RR: No bump in pay. Didn’t get me any pay. Didn’t get me off the platform. I
still had to teach.
LC: Did you give consideration to the idea of hanging in the instruction system
within the Army and taking that on as the next thing that you would do, or were you
anxious to get back in the air?
RR: Well, it didn’t matter. The way it was set up, if you were a ground school
instructor as long as you flew twenty hours a year you still got your flight pay. I
maintained my flight status, but I enjoyed the teaching. I actually enjoyed it. Even today I
still enjoy instructing.
LC: And you do a little bit of that now in your—
RR: That’s what I do. I work with kids twelve to sixteen years old.

LC: You work with them in particular programs?

RR: We call it Growing Recruits for Urban Business. It’s GRUB, G-R-U-B. We teach them a business plan around a garden, how to do business planning and personal skills, life skills.

LC: That’s in connection with the South Plains Food Bank?

RR: Food Bank, uh-huh.

LC: Sir, did you have a particular length of time that you were going to be at Fort Stewart? Did you know that it was like a two-year hook up or—?

RR: Eighteen months. In Army aviation everyone knew eighteen months to the day. If you were Regular Army you were going back.

LC: You were going back to Vietnam?

RR: Yeah. It was happening worldwide. It didn’t matter what you were doing.

LC: How did you feel about that? I can guess.

RR: Well, I actually applied, put in an application to resign.

LC: From the Army?

RR: From the Army and it came back. It said, “Not favorably considered. You many resubmit upon completion of your next tour in Southeast Asia.” (Laughs)

LC: I’m just being quiet for a minute. When did you make that application? Do you remember?

RR: It was in ’68. I don’t remember just the time. It was after I had been there a few months. I realized that other people started getting orders and it was right at the eighteenth month level they were getting their orders.

LC: And that that was what was going to happen to you, too.

RR: I just said, “Well, I’m not going to do it again,” but I wasn’t given any choice.

LC: Were you paying attention at all to the response to the war in the U.S. and what was going on on college campuses?

RR: You couldn’t keep from it.

LC: What did you think about all of that? Did you have an opinion?
RR: My opinion was if they didn’t like it here, they should go somewhere else.
That was my opinion. I’m a flag waver and I stand behind the president. I don’t care
what.

LC: That summer of 1968, of course there were two assassinations in our country
and I wonder if you remember anything about the assassination of Martin Luther King?
RR: Martin Luther King, I cried when I found that out.
LC: Where were you, sir? Do you remember?
RR: I was at home. I was in Hinesville, Georgia. That news bulletin come over
that he had been assassinated. I just couldn’t believe it. Here was a man that had worked
so hard toward nonviolent demonstrations. To be wiped out so violently just
unbelievable, just wasn’t fair.

LC: Well, it wasn’t fair, you’re right. With your background and having made
observations about the civil rights movement earlier in the south, did you have
apprehension about what might happen?
RR: I was afraid things might come unglued. I’m glad it didn’t. I’m glad that
everybody had the fortitude not to, but I really worried because there were some people,
even within his organization that were not that firmly set on the nonviolent protest. I
think I mentioned before, he had to just continually work towards that goal.

LC: And keep the pressure on.
RR: Keep the pressure on to keep it nonviolent.
LC: Just in your observations, or your reading, can you remember the names of
any of the people that he had to work particularly hard with to instill that non-violent
approach?
RR: No, I couldn’t tell you right now.
LC: But it was something that he was dealing with?
RR: Yeah.
LC: Later that spring, of course, Robert Kennedy was shot.
RR: There was a man that—he was another Doctor King. His life was built
around making sure that everything in the south stayed nonviolent. He used troops. He
used federal people. He used everybody. Probably a lot of what we did was against every
federal law there is, but he used everything in his power to keep it nonviolent and to keep
the integration process going.

LC: What did you think when you learned that he had been shot as well and then
that he had died?

RR: It just looked to me like that somewhere, someone was working toward
trying to stop the integration process. They’re trying to just put something in the cogs to
keep them from turning the direction they were going. Both of them, like I say, had been
so strong in that area.

LC: They were shot just within a couple months of each other.

RR: Just right next to each other. Just looked like there was some kind of
conspiracy going on.

LC: Did you really feel that at the time?

RR: I felt it at the time, yeah.

LC: What about in later years?

RR: Since then, after I have looked at everything and everything, there’s
probably no connection at all. It was just one of those things that it appeared that way at
the time. I always thought Robert Kennedy was a greater man than his brother and I
thought they were both great men.

LC: So you felt that loss particularly?

RR: I really felt the loss for both of them, but particularly him because he had
been so dominant in everything that took place in the early ‘60s, even to the late ‘60s and
in the south he was there. It was hands on.

LC: Did you notice anything going on? You were down in Hinesville with
African Americans who lived down that way and their reactions to this.

RR: Really, I didn’t notice much reaction there, but some in Savannah.

LC: What did you see there?

RR: In Savannah there were some protests, you know, peaceful protests and
things that took place. In Hinesville I didn’t see much of nothing. Then there was always
the ones speaking out for violence, “We’re never going to get anywhere with this
peaceful movement.”

LC: But it concerned you?
RR: Oh, it concerned me. It still concerns me today. The blacks are just as responsible today as the whites or Hispanics or anybody else are because they have their own people within that keeps everything stirred up.

LC: Stirred up, uh-huh. As you say, every group does.

RR: Every group does.

LC: Were your students that you might have noticed talking about the assassinations at all, the guys that you were instructing? Just chitchat in the hall or scuttlebutt?

RR: The only thing that ever came up is one of the—Mr. Bodges, I’m not sure what his name was. He was an instructor there and he had told my class one day that I had dinner with Dr. King once. I had dinner with about ten thousand that had dinner with him. (Laughs) It wasn’t a personal thing. They wanted to know about it.

LC: Did you actually see him at a dinner sometime?

RR: It was in Jackson, Mississippi, but there was about ten thousand people there.

LC: Was it a rally he was speaking at or something?

RR: It was a rally.

LC: What was that night like? Do you remember it now?

RR: His speeches were just so unbelievable.

LC: You mean the electricity in the air?

RR: The electricity that was in the air when he spoke. Even people that were going to turn him off, you could see that before the speech was over they were listening intently to what he said.

LC: Was that around the time of all the developments around James Meredith and stuff?

RR: Yeah.

LC: So you were at that dinner?

RR: I was there that day.

LC: I think I’ve seen a tape of that speech. If I’m thinking of the same one, it was a big dinner. Where was it held?

RR: It was in a civic center, a civic type center thing, a huge complex.
LC: Who all was there? Was it open to the public?
RR: It was open to the public. It was one of these things that if anybody wanted
to could come.
LC: Do you remember what he talked about that night or have an impression of
it?
RR: His dreams. His speeches, the context never changed. The wording did, but
he was always talking about a place where all children regardless could have a good
education, a good home to live in, an equal opportunity for medical care. The thing that I
told my kids as they were growing up and they started applying for their school grants
and things like this. I said, “Before Doctor King started his peaceful protest movement
there were no grants.” I said, “Poor kids, I don’t care what color they were didn’t go to
school.” I said, “Because of his movement and the equals rights act since then now
everyone has the opportunity to get this money and go.” That helped change their attitude
towards some of their classmates and things that did this.
LC: So you were speaking from what you heard?
RR: From experience.
LC: Yeah, what you learned about and you’d seen the change happen.
RR: I’ve seen some of it take place. It’s slow and it’s still a long way to go, but
we’ve made progress.
LC: Yes, sir. The instructor who said that you quote unquote, “had dinner with
Doctor King,” what was he telling the students that for? Why was he telling them that?
RR: They were discussing the assassination in the hallway. I think it was who did
it, one of those type things. Speculation on who did it is when it came up.
LC: You said that you were or intimidated that you were very much not looking
forward to having to go back to Southeast Asia. As the time came closer and you knew
that was more or less what was going to happen, how did you handle it?
RR: Well, I just resigned myself that I had to go.
LC: Did you think that you were probably going to have to do the same kind of
thing you had done before?
RR: No. I had rather have done what I did before than what I did while I was
over there.
LC: Okay. Go ahead and tell us what actually happened. How you got back over there and what you were assigned to do.

RR: Well, I got my orders and it was go to go to U-21 transition at Fort Rucker. I guess March, I suppose, March of ’69 I was supposed to go to Rucker. It’s a twin-engine beech craft. It’s a king air type beech craft that they use for command and control. I completed through my transition and arrived in Vietnam in April.

LC: Where did you come into?

RR: I came into Bien Hoa.

LC: Had you been to Bien Hoa before?

RR: No. This is my first time to be in Bien Hoa. I got there and they moved us to a holding company between Bien Hoa and Long Binh. It was probably on the Long Binh reservation. I don’t know, a big Army, folks over there. When I left the States I had orders to go to Nha Trang to the 2nd Field Force, the headquarters there. I’m sitting there waiting on transportation to Nha Trang and this lieutenant comes in and he says, “Mr. Riddle.” I said, “Right here.” He said, “Get your bag and come with me. You’re going to Long Thanh.” I said, “No, I’m not going to Long Thanh, I’m going to Nha Trang.” About that time, this colonel, about as big as a grizzly bear stuck his head around the door and he said, “You’re mine.” I said, “I understood that I was going to Nha Trang.” He said, “Every fixed wing person coming into this country on the second tour that’s multi engine qualified is mine.” I said, “Yes sir.” He introduced himself, Bob Baine. He said, “I’m company commander of the Command Aircraft Company.” He said, “I have the requirement to make sure I have one second tour person in every aircraft that leaves the ground.” He said, “Because of that I’m hand picking out of every aviator that comes through and you just got picked.”

LC: Did you have idea what this was going to mean?

RR: Well, what happened is they had an aircraft go down, run out of fuel and went down in the Delta with a Navy admiral and an Army general on board because it ran out of fuel. The two pilots were two young pilots right out of flight school first tour. So the wheels to be decided they had to get some experienced people in the airplanes.

LC: Do you know who those high-ranking officers were?

RR: No. I was just told the story.
LC: “This is how it happened.”

RR: He didn’t call any names. He just said, “This is what happened.” As a result he had the opportunity to hand pick from everybody that came in.

LC: So, Mr. Riddle, you were picked.

RR: I was picked. We went over to the other side of Long Binh and processed in. A warrant officer processed us in and we got into an airplane and he flew us to Long Thanh, which was about a three-minute flight. It seems like you were barely off the ground and you’re landing.

LC: What was the set up there at Long Thanh?

RR: Long Thanh. Our company was there and it had some elements of an aviation battalion. I can’t remember now. They had some helicopter companies there. There was a radio research company there and the Special Forces Long Thanh Training Camp was on the other side of the airfield from us.

LC: What were you going to be flying?

RR: U-21s. Beech King. Our BOQs were two men to a room about ten by twelve, something like that. They weren’t very big.

LC: Now was Long Thanh the headquarters of Command Aircraft Company?

RR: Yes. They had just moved out of Saigon. Previously the company had been in Saigon. It was one of the Army’s moves to move people out of the Saigon area. They had moved them out to the airfield in the middle of nowhere.

LC: Why did they want to get them out of Saigon?

RR: Just to get the American influence out of town. Get part of the American dollars out of there.

LC: I see. Who were you billeted with?

RR: We had our own. The company had it’s own BOQ.

LC: Did you share your unit where you slept and everything with other guys?

RR: Well, a club was shared with other units there on post, but the BOQs we had our own BOQ area. Our enlisted had their own enlisted area, their own mess.

LC: How many pilots were with the company?

RR: We had about a hundred pilots and about three hundred enlisted. It was a big company because we had our own field maintenance capability right within the company.
LC: Now was that primarily because of who you were flying around that you had your own facilities?
RR: Yes. I mean we were flying from General Abrams or Westmoreland, Abrams, on down, everybody.
LC: Well, tell me about your first flights, if you remember now, just when you first arrived there. What was the first flight that you made? Do you recall?
RR: My first flight, of course was just a check ride to make sure I was safe in the airplane. Then I had what we call an ash and trash run. We flew up to from—actually we went from Bien Hoa to Cam Ranh Bay. From Cam Ranh Bay we went into Qui Nhon and then from Qui Nhon up to Da Nang. From Da Nang into Hue, Phu Bai. From there we went back to Da Nang and picked up some people and carried them into Pleiku. We picked up somebody at Pleiku and carried them into Qui Nhon. Then at Qui Nhon we picked up to and flew them back into Long Binh. Give you a schedule. “You go pick this one up, drop them, pick this one up.” It’s just a tinny whiny airlines.
LC: What did you call it?
RR: Tinny whiny airline.
LC: (Laughter) How many people could you carry in your Beech King?
RR: In one configuration, which was not the general configuration, we could carry twelve. If we had the general’s big seats, the nice, comfortable seats for the generals we could carry eight.
LC: Guys on the ground were changing the seats in and out?
RR: Yeah. They could configure the aircraft based on the missions you had.
LC: Including the big, plush seats for the—
RR: Including the plush seats. When you started out you didn’t get the plush seats until you got a few hours. I got the plush seats the first time I flew General Bowers.
LC: I want to ask you about that, but first of all tell me a little bit about the actual aircraft. Did you have any defensive weapons on there at all?
RR: None whatsoever, it was strictly just like an airline. It is a twin turbo prop. We had all kind of weather ordinance radar. We had FM, VHS (very high speed), UHF (ultra high frequency), single side band, everything on it. We had tack in, VOR (very-
high-frequency omnidirectional radio range), radio compass, Dial LS, landing system.

We had everything in it but autopilot.

LC: Any survival equipment on there?
RR: None.
LC: Really? Okay.
RR: The only time we took survival equipment is if we flew General Myers to
the Philippines. We put all of our water survival gear on board to make that trip.
LC: Were you allowed to carry a side arm on the aircraft?
RR: No.
LC: Was that a specific regulation that that was not going to happen?
RR: I don’t know why. They just said that they had decided that the crews did not
need to carry a sidearm.
LC: Okay. Roy, can you just as they might come to you tell about different
people whose names might be recognized in the future. For example, you mentioned
General Westmoreland. Let’s start with him. Did you fly him at some point?
RR: No, I did not. I flew General Abrams.
LC: General Abrams, do you remember that flight?
RR: Yes. It was my last flight in Vietnam.
LC: Oh, really? Okay. Well, let’s start there then.
RR: That was the day that the Americans went into Cambodia, the launch into
Cambodia.
LC: So that would be in May of—
RR: In 1970. I was extended until that was over. Instead of going out—I had
fourteen months in-country instead of twelve that tour. We were in an orbit from Bien
Hoa kind of north-south orbit, out of the way of the helicopters and things, the landing
zones and artillery. Observing the movement in and all I can say is that you could see
aircraft from horizon to horizon.
LC: This is on the initial day of the excursion?
RR: The initial excursion.
LC: Into Cambodia.
RR: I never saw that many helicopters move at one time before. That was the biggest operation Roy ever observed.

LC: Where did Roy pick up General Abrams?
RR: Saigon.
LC: At Tan Son Nhut or where?
RR: At Tan Son Nhut. We carried him back there after about a two and a half hour flight.

LC: Did you ever touch down or were you observational?
RR: No. It was strictly in our orbit up there. We were flying about a fifteen-minute outbound and a fifteen-minute inbound orbit, staying out of the way of everything. He was very emphatic about never getting in the way of any operation.

LC: What kind of altitude were you up at?
RR: We were flying it at about five thousand feet. High enough we could see what was going on, but yet we were above the helicopters and everything else, but below the jet altitudes.

LC: What was your impression of him that day?
RR: He was excited. He felt like we were doing what we needed to do and that things were going smooth. Commanders are always excited when things are going right.

LC: Who was with him that day, a lot of people?
RR: I think General Myers was the only one with him. I was trying to remember. There’s different times, different people. The faces all kind of run together.

LC: Yeah, I know. It’s a long time ago also. You picked him up and General Myers as well and did your observational tour or whatever you were doing for a couple of hours and then you flew back to Tan Son Nhut.
RR: Dropped them off at Tan Son Nhut and I went back to Long Thanh.
LC: Had you been called down to Saigon specifically to make this flight?
RR: No. The boss called me in and he said, “This is going to be your last flight. Do it good.”
LC: Yeah, your passenger will only be General Abrams.
RR: He said, “Don’t use his call sign. He does not want his call sign used. He does not want anybody to know he is there.” He said, “Only use it when you get ready to go back in for a landing.”

LC: What was his call sign that day?
RR: You know I can’t tell you right now. I get him mixed up with one of the colonels that we were flying.

LC: That’s okay. In the course of that year, Roy, I know that you flew all over Southeast Asia. Not just in-country, but you were off to Thailand a couple of times, the Philippines as well. I gather that you did go to Malaysia at one point. Do you remember that one?
RR: Yeah, I went to Kuala Lumpur. We took the ambassador. His wife was in Kuala Lumpur.

LC: The U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam?
RR: Yeah.

LC: Who was that at the time? Do you remember?
RR: Oh, man.

LC: That’s okay. People can look that one up. Don’t worry. Did he have an entourage with him?
RR: No. It was just one person went with him.

LC: You had not flown to Malaysia before that?
RR: No, that was first flight.

LC: Did you get to stay over there or did you come right back?
RR: We stayed. We only stayed there four days and returned.

LC: So you stayed out there four days too?
RR: Yeah.

LC: What did you do?
RR: Stayed at the hotel.

LC: Did you get to get out into the KL (Kuala Lumpur) at all?
RR: We didn’t. We could have, but we didn’t because they had told us that we might have to make an early return.

LC: About what time in your tour was that? Do you have any idea?
RR: About midway. I had made a couple of flights to Thailand and then I made that one. I made a couple more flights to Thailand.

LC: Tell me about those flights to Thailand. What was the mission that time?

RR: General Reinzie was the chief of staff of communication specific. They had these communication sites, these radio relay sites, throughout Southeast Asia. We would fly him in to inspect these sites or sometimes we did recon with a U-21 to look at locations far and utilize the site. Like at Chiang Mai we were up in the northern province. We were looking at a site for a new radio relay station up there.

LC: He was coming in to look at sites that had already been more or less selected.

RR: Yeah or selected for a location for a new site or maybe somebody had told him they thought that’d be a good location and he was looking at it.

LC: He flew with you a couple of times?

RR: About four or five times. I flew him I guess more than any general officer while I was there.

LC: Do you know how to spell his last name?

RR: R-E-I-N-Z-I-E.

LC: What was your impression of him?

RR: He was very professional. He also looked out for his crew. He made sure the crew was taken care of before he ever took off on anything.

LC: Really?

RR: Yeah.

LC: Did he fly alone or did he have—?

RR: He had an aid that flew with him. I don’t know this. I think that I remember that his family was in Thailand, but they might not have been. I may be lying.

LC: That’s possible, though.

RR: I know that some of the others were.


RR: Anyhow, we’d go in and we’d fly like to Udorn and NKP (Nakhon Phanom) and Ubon and different places over there where they had these sites. Sometimes he would go in and he would shut down the one he went into to see if the others took over the traffic like they were supposed to. They were actual inspectional trips each time we went.
LC: Where was he based?
RR: He was based in Long Binh.
LC: Was he somebody that you saw on occasions other than when you were flying him?
RR: Well, when I first met him he was up in the I Corps area. I think we were at Dong Ha or somewhere up there. I had flown in to pick him up. I’m sitting on the air stair door. They got it down and the other pilot is inside the aircraft and I’m just sitting on the air stair door waiting. He drives up. This is after I got my commission because I got a commission on my second tour.
LC: Your commission to first lieutenant?
RR: Yeah.
LC: That was in May.
RR: I’m sitting on the air stair door and he walks up and he said, “Damn, you’re an old lieutenant.” That’s the way he put it.
LC: What did you say back? “Yes, sir”?
RR: I said, “Yes, sir, I am, but I’m your transportation home.” He said, “Good.”
LC: Probably actually made him feel good.
RR: In a few days, his aid called and asked for me by name to fly him to Thailand. My boss went into orbit.
LC: Why’s that?
RR: Colonel Baines said, “Nobody tells me who to assign on an airplane. I’m not assigning a crew that anybody asks for. I will assign the crews.” I mean he was just stomping, raving mad.
LC: Was this a turf thing for him basically?
RR: I guess, I don’t know. I said, “Sir, I don’t know nothing about it.” I said, “I didn’t even know that they had called until you called me in here.” “Well, you’re not going. I’m sending somebody else.” I said, “Okay, that’s fine. I’m going to do whatever you tell me to do.” I go into my hooch and about ten o’clock there’s a knock on the door and he steps in and he says, “Pack your bags. You’re leaving for Thailand in the morning.” I said, “Sir?” He said, “They’re going to bring Reinzie and his aid over here by helicopter and y’all are going to leave from here.” He said, “Be ready to leave at 4:30.”
Never an explanation of what changed it. What took place I have no idea. After that, most of the time that General Reinzie went somewhere, I flew him. I have no idea what happened. His roommate, General Bowers, was the same one I worked for in the 7th Division—

LC: In Korea.

RR: When I was doing morale services. He was now a general. Between him and his roommates, that was my two that I flew more than anything.

LC: Now what was General Bowers’ assignment?

RR: He was the chief of staff of personnel. General Reinzie was the chief of staff of communications.

LC: For the Pacific?

RR: Yeah.

LC: How did you get along with General Bowers this time around?

RR: Great. He congratulated me and was glad that I was still moving forward. He acted like this is the old home week. They even invited me over. I had dinner with them one evening. They grilled steaks and baked potatoes and fed me like a king in the combat zone, outside the BOQ.

LC: I bet that made you feel pretty good.

RR: Made me feel good. He told the General Reinzie about all I had done for him while we were in Korea handling the AG morale services.

LC: He just had a good feeling about you?

RR: Yeah, and I had a good feeling about him.

LC: That helps a lot I’m sure. So you kind of became, unofficially, but in some way the pilot to each of these generals.

RR: I became their transport most of the time.

LC: Where was General Bowers busy going?

RR: He was going to visit different commands within Vietnam. We’d go like to the 4th Division, to the 25th Division, to the Marines, to the 101st. He was really concerned with personnel issues. Ever since the first time I met him I’ve never known him when he was not concerned about the morale of people and if they were being taken care of, even in a combat zone.
LC: How old was General Bowers at this point?
RR: I would say by then he was probably in his 50s because he was older than
some of the others.
LC: I wondered whether that was the case. Did he ever talk to you about some of
his past experiences in the Army? Did he ever talk to you about, for example, World War
II or any of that?
RR: No. The only thing we ever talked about was Vietnam and it was war wise.
In the 7th Division we talked about personnel wise. We didn’t talk about the war or the
defense effort. We just talked about personnel.
LC: Yeah. So he kind of kept it on track in a way.
RR: Yeah.
LC: Did you have admiration for these guys that you were flying around?
RR: Oh, yeah, definitely.
LC: Can you say why?
RR: I just kind of looked up to them because they had accomplished—I guess
every red-blooded American, well, a flag waving American that has that thing that they’d
like to be a general or a Patton or something like this. I kind of looked up to those that
had accomplished the feat and had made it to get to where they were at.
LC: Yeah. It’s a lot of accomplishment there.
RR: It takes a lot of work, a lot of dedication, a lot of sacrifice.
LC: You mentioned at one point that you flew to the Philippines with General
Myers. Can you tell about that flight?
RR: Scary. We had computed this thing and computed it and based on wind and
everything else we should be able to make it to Clark Air Force Base with forty-five
minutes fuel left on board.
LC: What were you flying?
RR: U-21. But we had to go to Qui Nhon and refuel the aircraft and top it off
there to be able to do it. That was the nearest point. So we had to have favorable winds
which we had. We got his stuff as light as we could on board and went to Qui Nhon and
typed off. We got about 125 miles off the coast of Vietnam and we couldn’t pick up any
kind of communications at all, navigational aids. Finally I get this C-130, I hear them,
call them, ask their location, get them to come up air to air with us and get their location.
I tune in on him and get his location and he tells me where he’s located off of the Clark
tack in to point my position. I can see already that we are not getting there as fast as I
thought we would. To make a long story short, when we passed over land we had low
fuel warning light. I called Clark and asked them if we could get a straight in because
they had people backed up in traffic, always backed up there because people coming in
from all over the world. I explained to him and he said, “You declaring an emergency
Long Trip?” I said, “No, I’m not declaring emergency. I’m just asking for priority.” I
said, “I’ve got an Army code on board and a low fuel warning light.” Finally another
operator took the radio and he said, “Long Trip this is so and so.” He said, “Turn right to
head in.” He carried me right down to the threshold. When we refueled I think I figured I
had seven minutes fuel left and me with a general officer on board.

LC: That was a bit of a white knuckler then.
RR: More than a white knuckler. That ocean is not very friendly.
LC: No, sir. When you called in and you said, “I have an Army coat on board,” is
that what you—?
RR: Code.
LC: Code. What did that actually mean?
RR: Well, you had your Army code seven, code eight, code nine, code one,
depending on the grade of the officer being flown.
LC: Okay, that’s a rank?
RR: In rank, yeah.
LC: For a general, like General Myers what code would it be?
RR: You know I can’t tell you right now. I was trying to think when you asked
the question and I’m just blank.
LC: Okay. That’s all right. Don’t worry. What about coming back? How long did
you stay up there actually, first of all?
RR: We stayed there a week. While he was there we went to Manila. We went
out to Subic Bay. I had wanted to go the exchange at Subic Bay. I wanted to go to the
exchange at Subic Bay. I went out to it. That’s where I bought my movie camera that got
destroyed. They had a wonderful photo shop in that PX (Post Exchange) there at Subic.
There’s all these seamen coming in, all that money they had saved up while they were at sea, they had a place to spend it.

LC: They had good equipment there?
RR: Good equipment. I bought me a Cannon, the camera and projector, some other stuff, but anyhow long story short I lost it.

LC: Well, you lost it under some pretty hairy circumstances though.
RR: But anyhow, we met back. We had a date to be back because his family was in the Philippines. Going back, the winds were a lot more favorable and we actually went on in to Long Binh without refueling. We didn’t even have to go into Qui Nhon to refuel because we had a good tailwind coming back. We found out talking to the Air Force that whoever had given us the forecast had given us the wrong forecast winds. If we would have been about two thousand feet higher we would have had favorable winds going over, but we didn’t know it until after it was all over with.

LC: So you just got bad information.
RR: Yeah. It’s just one of those things that happens when you fly.

LC: Roy, on any of those others flights that you did over that fourteen-month period, did you ever come under any kind of fire?
RR: Not to my knowledge. There was a time that we left Cam Ranh, not Cam Ranh, but Dong Ba Thin, which is just outside of Cam Ranh that they said we were taking fire off the end of the runway. I don’t think we were. I think that there was some firing going on, but the mussel flashes weren’t toward the aircraft. They were away from it. We could have taken fire somewhere, but I would have never have known it because you’re moving about 130 once you break the threshold and climbing on out. With that bird, it got to altitude in a hurry. So you were up above the ground fire just pretty quick.

LC: In general, were you flying alone?
RR: No. It was always two crewmembers on board.

LC: Did you work with the same person?
RR: Most of the time I was with Dick Ecklund. He was a captain, West Point graduate. He was a first tour person and I was a second tour person on the airplane.

LC: His last name was spelled—
LC: He was from the Point?
RR: He was from West Point.
LC: How did you get along with him?
RR: Wonderful.
LC: Really?
RR: Yeah. He and I had a good rapport.
LC: Where was he from?
RR: New England. I want to say Connecticut and I may be wrong, but I keep thinking it was Connecticut. He even had a brother that was also in the service that was over there at the same time. They were both just wonderful people.
LC: Did you hook up with his brother on some occasions?
RR: No, I just met him. We just met him one time. I forgot where we landed. We landed some place and his brother was there to meet us.
LC: What was his brother doing? Do you remember?
RR: He was an infantry officer. He was in an infantry unit. That’s where Dick wanted to be, but they had him flying airplanes.
LC: He wanted to be on the ground, though?
RR: Well, he wanted a ground tour. I mean any infantry officer wants to get a ground tour.
LC: Sure. Was he disappointed in the posting that he had pulled then?
RR: Oh, no. He asked for it. He had volunteered for flight school. It was one of those things that he thought he would get his wings and they’d send him to a ground assignment and aviation wouldn’t have a priority. It was just the opposite. They were so short of pilots that the aviation had the priority.
LC: How long had he been out of the Point, a couple of years?
RR: About a year, year and a half.
LC: So he was just a young man then.
RR: Yeah, he was young.
LC: But a nice guy.
RR: Yeah. Some of the best officers I ever had dealings with were the West Point officers.
LC: Really?
RR: Yeah. They really—I don’t know. They seemed to accept the fact that they
were given a license to learn once they graduated. Not all did but most of them did.
LC: Yeah and you formed an impression about that. You said earlier, Roy, that or
you gave me to think that you really didn’t love this particular job of flying all these
high-powered guys around all that much. Is that how you felt about it?
RR: Well, you had so much time just doing nothing. I mean you’re flying
somewhere and you’re sitting and waiting. You were waiting between flights. You might
have to wait for long periods of time between flights.
LC: So you had to kill a lot of time?
RR: It was just a lot of time that had to be killed.
LC: Since you were off on these missions where you might have a lay over three
or four days or even longer, could you do the kinds of things you had done the first tour
to kind of keep yourself sane, like have a pet, grow the vegetables, and stuff like that?
RR: No, you were pretty much on call. You had to be around somewhere. Out
there we were right out in the middle of a plantation and nothing was available. It wasn’t
where you could walk into town and do anything.
LC: Right. There’s nothing around there.
RR: There’s nothing around there. We were right out in the middle of a rubber
plantation. Boredom was terrible. For somebody who was already having a drinking
problem the first tour that wasn’t good at all.
LC: Just created more opportunity.
RR: You’re just creating more opportunity to drink. The only thing I did to kill
time is I built a swimming pool for the colonel.
LC: You built a swimming pool?
RR: Yeah. He wanted a swimming pool and he wanted it right outside of his
quarters between it and the officers club.
LC: How did you do this?
RR: Well, I went across and talked to my friends at Special Forces. They went
with me to Cam Ranh Bay with a convoy. We picked up the gravel and concrete and stuff
we needed there. We came back and we built the pool and opened it up and then the
flight surgeon closed it because we didn’t have a filter system on it. Then one of the
generals asked me how the pool was going and I told him it was closed because we didn’t
have a filter. About, I don’t know, a week later or so I got a call to come to Long Binh
and they had a filter for me.

LC: It was sitting right there waiting for you.

RR: Yeah. I went and hooked it up. It had a box of test stuff and the whole works
you need for a pool, the chemicals, everything. Where it came from I don’t know. It was
just there. We hooked it back up and got it treated and a chemical test. The flight surgeon
said, “I thought I told you to close the pool.” I said, “Well.” He said we had to have a
filter and test kit. I said, “Here it is.” He got to looking at it and said okay.

LC: So this was located right outside—

RR: Right outside the colonel’s quarters, right next to the officers club at Long Thanh.

LC: Now was this Colonel Baine?

RR: Colonel Baine, yeah.

LC: How do you spell his last name? B-A-N-E?

RR: B-A-I-N-E.

LC: Did you guys ever get to use it?

RR: Yeah.

LC: You did?

RR: Yeah. Everybody got to use it. It was for everybody. It wasn’t just for him. It
was for everybody. It was for all the officers. Like I say, it was right outside the officers
club. Then we had a day for the enlisted. Two days a week the enlisted could use it.

LC: Really?

RR: Yeah.

LC: So that was kind of a good thing.

RR: It was a morale thing. I’ve never done a swimming pool before or since.

LC: I was going to say have you picked up something about how to engineer one
of these when you were working in trade?

RR: Well, I just learned how to do some construction when I was in it. So I just
took off and did what I thought ought to be done, is all I know. I couldn’t have done it
with out the people at the Long Thanh training camp. They were wanting an aircraft on standby for prisoner snatches. So it worked out. I told the colonel, I said, “Okay.” I said, “I can get some material, but we have to have one aircraft that we can use like it’s a snatch a prisoner out of the north that we can pick up in Nha Trang or wherever they got him and bring him down here.” He said, “If you get me a pool, we’ll do it.”

LC: Is that what happened? Did you end up kind of setting up an aircraft on that?
RR: Yeah. We hauled in two or three NVA generals that they had snatched.
LC: Did you fly any of those missions?
RR: One of them.
LC: Oh, really? Where did you fly to to pick up—?
RR: I picked them up at Nha Trang. Flew them to Long Thanh, the training camp.
LC: Who was accompanying him?
RR: Members of SOG. Names I don’t know. I didn’t know who was part of their team.
LC: At Long Thanh what was going to happen?
RR: Interrogation.
LC: Do you remember this general? Do you remember looking at him and having—?
RR: I remember looking at him.
LC: Did you have any feelings about just confronting him face to face and having him in your plane?
RR: No, it didn’t bother me. Like I say it was just another job.
LC: After you brought him back down to Long Thanh did you ever see him again?
RR: No, that’s the last. Well, I know from talking to friends of mine over there that after they had interrogated him there for about a week and then he was moved on to Saigon. The U.S. was wanting to talk to him and get some information before any of the Vietnamese people interrogated him.
LC: What kind of state was he in when you saw him?
RR: Oh, he was healthy. When I stopped to pick him up, he was drinking a cup of coffee, American coffee.

LC: So he wasn’t exactly agitated or uncomfortable?

RR: No, but they had him where you couldn’t go anywhere.

LC: How did they accomplish that?

RR: His feet were shackled. His hands were free, but his feet were shackled.

LC: So he wasn’t running anywhere.

RR: No, he wasn’t running anywhere.

LC: Did you have any fun on this tour?

RR: Did I what?

LC: Did you have any fun at all on this tour

RR: Any fun?

LC: Yeah.

RR: Oh, yeah, I had some fun.

LC: Did you have an R&R (rest and recuperation)?

RR: I went to the Philippines on R&R and I went to Hawaii for R&R.

LC: For a week each time?

RR: Well, I took at week leave to the Philippines. Then I toured some of the Corregidor and some of the battlegrounds of World War II.

RR: Was that a particular interest of yours?

RR: Yeah. World War II history has been an interest of mine all along. The Philippines definitely had been an interest of mine.

LC: Now your tour this time was extended, as you said, for a couple of extra months.

RR: Two months.

LC: How did that come about?

RR: Well, I got appointed to first lieutenant two months after I got in-country. Again, it was because of Army regulations and I didn’t argue with them. They came up with this requirement came down from Washington D.C. that every aircraft with a general officer on board had to have a commissioned officer. Like I’ve said, in aviation most of your pilots are warrant officers. So the colonel said, “Well, we’ll just cancel all
the flights.” He said, “I can only send out,” ever how many flights it was, twelve or
fifteen, whatever it was. “We’ll cancel the rest of them.” “You can’t do that.” He said,
“Well, that’s all the commissioned officers I have.” They said, “You have authority. If
anybody wants a direct commission then let us know.”

LC: Okay. So you could get commissioned?
RR: Yeah. So I got a reserve commission. To get to captain in the combat zone
was twelve months. Outside the combat zone was two years. So by staying two extra
months, I came back as a captain.

LC: That was something you were willing to do?
RR: Yeah.

LC: As you approached the time for you to leave this second tour, how were you
feeling?
RR: I was ready to leave.
LC: I bet you were.
RR: I was ready to leave.
LC: Did you know where the Army was going to send you?
RR: Yeah. I was going to Fort Benning, Georgia, for the infantry officer course.
LC: When did you find out that that’s what you were going to be doing?
RR: About three months before time to leave.

LC: Did that sound okay to you?
RR: Yeah.

LC: You said that your final flight was carrying General Abrams and that was on
the day of the incursion.
RR: Right.

LC: Do you remember anything else about the time just before you left?
RR: Why he said it was my final flight, I had a flight back from Thailand and
then I had been up too many hours and working too many hours or something like this.
We were coming into Long Thanh. Colonel Baine was with me and I was really high. I
mean too high to make a safe landing and he took the aircraft and landed it. He told me
then he was going to ground me until I rested some. Then he called me in and said he was
going to let me make that last flight with Abrams, but I better not screw it up.
LC: Right. Were you well rested that day then?
RR: Oh, yeah. I was ready for that one. I had got everything packed and ready. I had three boxes outside my hooch ready to ship. We had just a few little rockets and borders come in and one of them just happened to splat right in the middle of my boxes.
LC: Yeah. What did you lose, sir?
RR: I lost a camera. I lost a projector. I lost film. I lost a reel to reel video recorder or music recorder, a deck. Oh, I don’t know. All totaled I had about 3,000 dollars worth of cameras and electrical stuff that I had gotten. When I went to the Philippines I flew Myers over I got part of the stuff. Then when I went back and went to Corregidor and all I went back to Subic and got the rest of the stuff I wanted because I could get them just fraction of what it was going to cost me in the States.
LC: Sure. So you had them all packed up and ready to go?
RR: I had it all packed up and ready to go.
LC: And you lost the whole—
RR: I lost them.
LC: Was there anything that you had bought that didn’t get hurt or did it all just—?
RR: No, it all got hurt. It was all just totally demolished. My hooch would have been, but it was sandbagged. Colonel Baine said, “Somebody has your name. You’re going home tomorrow.”
LC: Is that how it felt to you too?
RR: Yeah. He said, “I’ve talked to Long Binh and I’m going to get you over there tomorrow and they are going to get you out of country.”
LC: Sir, do you remember flying out that time, out of Vietnam?
RR: A little bit. I kind of crashed.
LC: Yeah, just exhausted.
RR: Yeah. After two tours of it, regardless of what you are doing, your body is kind of totally wiped out.
LC: Yeah, I can only imagine. Did you have a little break before you had to report at Benning?
RR: Yeah. We came into Travis and we went to San Francisco. That’s where we got called baby killers and got spit on.

LC: Did that actually happen to you, sir?

RR: That happened.

LC: This would have been in June of 1970?

RR: May of 1970.

LC: What actually happened there at the airport?

RR: There was a bunch of them there, all lined up around that bus where everybody was coming off, calling everybody baby killers and spitting.

LC: Did you look back at them? Did you look at them?

RR: Yeah.

LC: Did anybody say anything back to them?

RR: Oh, there were some words said, but it was a waste of time.

LC: Were they older or younger?

RR: Younger, yeah young generation. They wouldn’t let them in the terminal. They tried to get into the terminal. They wouldn’t let them in the terminal.

LC: So they’re standing outside.

RR: There was an officer out there, LAPD (Los Angeles Police Department) or airport police. Not LA, San Francisco. He was saying, “Y’all get inside. They’re not coming inside.” He kind of ushered everybody inside.

LC: How did that make you feel?

RR: A little upset. Not a little, a lot upset.

LC: Yes, sir. Can you describe it?

RR: Just a feeling that you’ve gone, you’ve done your best. You’ve done what you’re told to do. I didn’t kill any babies, not to my knowledge. If I did it wasn’t on purpose. For someone to sit back and enjoy the freedom we have in this country and put down somebody that’s fought to maintain it, well regardless of what the thoughts of the war were the soldiers themselves are just doing what they were told to do.

LC: Did you hear what the reactions were amongst the other men that you were with?
RR: About like mine were. I think the biggest comment was we oughta pack them all up and ship them off to Russia.

LC: You had a little time off when you flew out of San Francisco.

RR: Yeah.

LC: Did you come home again?

RR: Came home and then I went to Fort Benning to the officer’s course.

LC: How were your parents feeling at this point, about seeing you?

RR: They were glad to see me. Everybody was glad to see me.

LC: Did they throw you a little party or something?

RR: No. We don’t ever do parties.

LC: They were just very relieved probably to see you.

RR: They were relieved I was back.

LC: You knew at this point, I’m sure, that you were not going to have to go back.

RR: Well, I didn’t know.

LC: You didn’t know?

RR: No, because the thing was still going on. This was ’70 and at that time it was still going on. I did know by then that I was so close to retirement that I wasn’t about to try to get out then.

LC: Right, you were, what, sixteen years at this point?

RR: Yeah, I was fifteen years in, approaching those final years.

LC: When you went to Fort Benning, what were your assignments there?

RR: I was just a student in the student officer company, going through the infantry drill, all of this. Drill ceremonies and weapons and bivouac and compass and all that good stuff.

LC: Had you been promoted at this point yet, to captain?

RR: Yeah. I was captain when I came back.

LC: Was this the student work that you were doing easy for you?

RR: Most of it was. The physical part was a little harder for me than it was the younger guys.

LC: You had to do the same things—

RR: I was with kids just right out of college.
LC: Yes, sir. You had to do the same thing they did.

RR: I was expected to do the same thing they did. It was a little taxing at times, but we made it.

LC: What kind of shape were you in by this point?

RR: I was still in pretty good shape. Dick Ecklund and I used to run every morning. If we weren’t flying we would go out and run. He could run twice what I did, but we would always go run a while.

LC: So that helped keep you in trim.

RR: Part of the time he would run backwards while I was running forward. He reminded me of the SEALs. Up in Da Nang they were always doing that. He would run backwards in the sand and I was just barely making it forward.

LC: You stayed at Fort Benning for a few months, is that right?

RR: Yeah. I think it was two months.

LC: And then where did you go?

RR: Well, I was supposed to go to the Army aviation element at Fort Stewart again, but I had gone home and had gone to the officers club at Fort McClellan. Lon Smith, who was a colonel that I had known that used to be with Special Forces my first tour, in fact he had been part of one of the Special Forces that caught up in the Phoenix program. He didn’t make general. To show the Army’s appreciation for what he had done, he got to be a post commander as a colonel. He was a post commander and he found out that I was multi-engine qualified. He said he wanted me there for his pilot.

LC: Where was he post commander?

RR: Fort McClellan, Alabama.

LC: Back to Alabama again.

RR: Back to McClellan. I didn’t think nothing about it. I got back to Benning and this colonel calls me in his office and he says, “The Army doesn’t appreciate people like you.” I said, “What do you mean?” He said, “We don’t appreciate people just running around getting their assignments changed where they want them instead of going where the Army needs them.” I still didn’t know what he was talking about. I said, “Sir, I have no idea what you’re talking about.” He said, “These.” He said, “We just got orders in
that you’re not going to Fort Stewart now to the fixed wing training facility, that you’re going to Fort McClellan, Alabama.” That’s the first I knew about it.

LC: Of course he thought you had somehow pulled the strings.

RR: He thought I did. The colonel did it. He did it all after he talked to me that night in the club. I didn’t know it.

LC: So you got out of Benning and went over to Alabama?

RR: Went to Fort McClellan to the Reilly Army Airfield.

LC: Your job was primarily to fly the colonel around?

RR: That was the assistant aviation officer and airfield commander. I was over the airfield.

LC: You were the airfield commander?

RR: Yeah. I was it. There were a lot of unhappy people on that post. He had majors. He had captains. He had colonels with wings on that were in ground jobs. He calls this junior captain in that he makes an airfield commander.

LC: Did that make life a little hard for you?

RR: Well, it made life hard for them if they made it hard for me because they had to use my aircraft to get their flight time in.

LC: Got it, okay. Describe in general the things that you would do in that job.

RR: We had helicopters. We had Hueys. We had the OH-15, observation helicopters. We had a U-6, a U-8 and a T-41 to support the chemical school, the Women’s Army Force Center, and Fort McClellan itself. Primarily we supported the schools with our flights.

LC: You were in charge of making assignments for the aircraft?

RR: Right. Well, I had an operations officer that did it. He worked for me. When I got there we were a detachment and we had it on aviation detachment out there. Later while I was there they disbanded it and made it a platoon of the Headquarters Company. So I went from detachment commander to airfield commander.

LC: How long did you stay there?

RR: Until I retired or I went to the on campus school in September of ’73.

LC: Is that ’73?

RR: ’73. It wasn’t on campus, Jacksonville State ’73.
LC: Were you completing your degree?
RR: Yeah.
LC: What did you actually major in?
RR: Personnel management.
LC: Was that what you were kind of looking to do after you left the Army, was work in personnel?
RR: I didn’t really know. This is one person that just totally missed up in that area. I never planned beyond the Army. I never planned on being anything but Army. I was in for a rude awakening and a rude adjustment and everything else once I got out because I had made no plans for beyond the Army.
LC: That really never came up in terms of you being mentored or anything about what was going to happen after you retired.
RR: No, it was later. It was about the time that I got out or just shortly after that they started these retirement counseling things. The only thing they did with me, they contacted me. I was in school and they said if I wanted a retirement physical I had to arrange for it because the Army didn’t arrange for it.
LC: That was it?
RR: That was it.
LC: And you were taking classes at Jacksonville State?
RR: Yeah.
LC: What was the climate like there at the state university?
RR: They were flag waving rebels. There was a bunch of good kids there. They put up with this old man.
LC: Did you have trouble being the old guy?
RR: They always asked me about Vietnam and about my Army experience. They had a real strong ROTC program there.
LC: Did you find yourself able to talk about it in general terms?
RR: Yeah.
LC: You actually retired in September of ’74, is that right?
RR: Right. That’s correct.
LC: Sir, I want to ask you a little bit about your life as a Vietnam veteran. In general, how do you think the federal government has treated veterans from that era?

RR: Well, kind of ignored mostly.

LC: What about the Veteran’s Administration?

RR: Well, it is just always under-funded, even the people that tried it. Lubbock has probably got one of the best VA (Veteran’s Administration) clinics anywhere in the nation.

LC: Why is that? Why do you think it’s so good?

RR: Because they have been for years. Ever since they have moved out of the federal building they have worked toward preventative medicine rather than waiting until something happens and caring for it then. Realizing if they can prevent things from happening the veterans in a lot better shape. Their funding has just kept them—every time you turn around they’re short on doctors again. They don’t have the money to maintain the staff.

LC: So primarily would you say that any problems with the VA could be solved if they were given an appropriate level of funding?

RR: I think funding would solve ninety percent of it.

LC: Roy, when you were over there did you ever think that you might have been exposed to Agent Orange at all?

RR: I’m sure I was.

LC: Really? Do you remember any incident where you think—?

RR: The Kilo Valley that’s out by the Special Forces—I went blank on the name of it.

LC: That’s okay. That’s all right. So this would be during your first tour?

RR: It was during my first tour. The Dong Tre Special Forces camp, there was a valley that was northwest of Dong Tre that was a fertile rice growing area where the North Vietnamese were always coming in and taking the crops. The ranch hands sprayed it several times while I was over during my first tour. I would say two or three times. We always flew when they were spraying to watch for ground fire. So you were spraying right in—you can see the mist on the aircraft when they do it.

LC: What sort of altitude were the spraying aircraft flying at?
RR: In the valley there they were probably flying at a thousand, twelve hundred feet, pretty low.

LC: You were kind of in that same range too.

RR: We were doing the same range. We were trying to fly where we could observe the ground fires as he was doing it.

LC: Do you think that anything that has happened to you subsequently might be linked to Agent Orange?

RR: Well, it could be, but it could be anything else. When you get my age it could be anything. I’m not going to say it is or it is not. I just say that it could be.

LC: But you have never been in any kind of medical trials or anything for VA around Agent Orange exposure?

RR: No.

LC: Sir, have you watched any of the many, many films that have come out? I think we talked a little bit about this before, about Vietnam?

RR: Like you talking about Platoon and all of those?

LC: Exactly.

RR: I’ve watched some of them. I have difficulty watching them. Quite some time ago, I purchased We Were Soldiers because the first VR size area I had to fly was at Chu Pongs, there in the Ia Drang Valley area. I kept it around here for two or three months and I finally watched it. After I watched it, I had nightmares for two weeks.

LC: That’s a very powerful film.

RR: It’s so powerful and so real.

LC: You think it was pretty realistic?

RR: Yeah. I heard some of the people talk about Colonel Johnson during that period of time that took place and from the accounts that I heard. I wasn’t there. I just go by the accounts of others. It was pretty real, the pilots that was involved there and all. It was a pretty realistic portrayal of just what they were doing, just continuously exposing themselves.

LC: Right. In and out, in and out.

RR: In and out. You can kind of visualize what it’s like having been there in the cockpit. You can visualize what it’s like and what’s going on.
LC: That kind of rattled you a little bit?
RR: Yeah.
LC: It rattled me and I wasn’t—
RR: It brought back memories.
LC: I don’t have any memories and I was a little shaken.
RR: It rekindled a lot of memories, but I have looked at them. Like I say it’s hard
sometimes, but I have looked at them and looked at the portrayal. It’s probably of the
ones I have watched, what I was exposed to, was one of the most realistic portrayals.
LC: Have you spent any time reading any of the many, many books that have
been written about the war?
RR: I would say I probably got fifty that I’ve read.
LC: Really? Do you read mostly historical accounts?
RR: Historical accounts, different individual accounts.
LC: Is there any one book that you particularly think is a good one or would
recommend?
RR: No because most of them are written from a ground perspective rather than
an air perspective. Having not been on the ground, I don’t know what it was like there. I
only know what it was like looking at the guy on the ground from where I was at. What I
saw is different from what they saw.
LC: So in some ways, most of the books don’t really portray your war?
RR: Right, but it helps give me a feeling of what their war was like.
LC: True. Yeah, you can learn something. Sir, do you remember 1975 when
South Vietnam finally fell?
RR: I do.
LC: How did you feel? Do you remember?
RR: Sick. I just couldn’t believe it happened. It took me a long time to deal with
it and accept it.
LC: Have you ever given any thought to visiting Vietnam? A lot of veterans now
are going back and I wondered if that was something that appealed to you at all.
RR: You know there’s times that I think I would like to go back and then
there’s—when I look at the tours that they make and where they are going, I don’t think it
would be that worthwhile to me. If I was wanting to go back to any one place it would be into the Tuy Hoa area, Phu Yen province area and I don’t see any of the tours going to that area.

LC: No. If that opportunity came up you might take it?
RR: Yeah, because the Delta, all it means I flew some U-21s in and out of there and landed. Admiral or general got off and I took off and went again. I was never on the ground there. Even at Holloway, up at Pleiku I was never on the ground anywhere except in the facility itself. Tuy Hoa was the only place I was really there meeting and acquainted with Vietnamese people.

LC: And connected in some way?
RR: And connected with them. I always wonder what happened to them.
LC: What happened to the people that you saw there?
RR: Yeah. You know what happened to the people at the province headquarters and what happened to the district chiefs and different ones that I knew.

LC: Does that uncertainty about their fate kind of rankle with you too?
RR: Yeah. It’s one of the things that’s still not resolved. You read about a lot of the country, but there’s other areas of the country that you hear nothing about.

LC: If you were up in front of a class of young people, and I know that you may actually do this because you do work with young people, if they asked you what you learned from your long experience with the U.S. Army and in Vietnam specifically on two tours, what would you say to them?
RR: I would have to say you have to be survivalist. You have to learn to live and survive under the situation that you’re under at the time. There has been people, and I’ve told them, the kids, there has been people that were attorneys and lawyers and something happened and they made one little mistake. They ended up in the federal pen. I said now they can’t practice law anymore and they’re out digging dishes. They went from riches to rags. I said people have gone the other way. You have to be survivalist to learn how to survive regardless of the situation and move on.

LC: Is the moving on part as least as important as—
RR: That’s very important. You know today’s history already. Our conversation is history.
LC: Yes, sir. That’s right. Absolutely.

RR: We have the future ahead of us. Don’t look back. What I tell people, don’t look back. Look forward. If I look back on all the stuff you and I have talked about I would probably still be in some bar somewhere drinking.

LC: I hear you and I know this is often a difficult process for people to go through.

RR: If I look forward and I look at what I can accomplish with a twelve or fourteen year old out here, if I put some energy into helping direct their life. That’s totally new. That’s our leader of a tomorrow.

LC: Yes, sir. That’s right. Is there anything else you would like to add in this interview, Roy? Anything we haven’t covered?

RR: Well, I think the only thing right now, I have found the place that—everybody has to find a place that once they retire they’re comfortable with. When I started out at the South Plains Food Bank, volunteering and teaching people how to feed themselves and then got involved with the youth program trying to develop leaders for tomorrow. I found my place. I just volunteered. I don’t get paid for it. It’s very rewarding. You have some kid that’s fourteen or fifteen years old come up and put their arm around you and say, “You know what, you’ve really made a difference in my life.”

LC: It’s meaningful.

RR: That means something. I’ve tried everything. I’ve been business, president of a company, restaurants, cafeterias and none of it meant anything until I started doing this.

LC: So in some way you found something that you can, a place that you can give back?

RR: I’m giving back.

LC: You’ve given quite a bit, sir. You spent a long time serving your country.

RR: But the country gave to me and now I’m giving back.

LC: Well, I want to thank you very much for participating.

RR: Okay.

LC: Thank you.