Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I’m conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Robert Lathrop. Today is May 17, 2004. It’s approximately 10:41 a.m. Central Standard Time. I’m in Lubbock, Texas in the Special Collections Library interview room on the campus of Texas Tech University and Mr. Lathrop is in Sutherlin, Oregon. Sir, why don’t we begin with where you were born and when you were born and a little bit about your childhood?

Robert Lathrop: Okay. I was born in Walla Walla, Washington on June 8, 1942, which happens to be the day the Battle of Coral Sea, I think.

RV: Yes sir.

RL: And I have a photographic memory and I started documenting things before I could talk. And in World War II, we didn’t have anything. My dad worked…he worked as a Caterpillar parts man. He couldn’t go to war because he was the last person there in his business. We couldn’t get gas, so I remember the war. I can remember the war. We lived between a B-24 Base and a fifteen thousand bed Army hospital, so I saw the worst effects of the war.

RV: Now where was this again?


RV: Okay.

RL: Southeastern Washington. We had a big B-24 Base on one end of town, and the bombers came over our house at about eighty feet, one hundred feet. And then on the other end, we had a fifteen thousand-bed Army hospital with the worst casualties you can
imagine. And so before I was two years old or three years old and up till when I was about five, I saw the worst of the World War II. And the first thing that I have a perfect image of and I could draw it, was it turns out to have been in August 1944, when I was two years and two months old. We went out and there was this massive fire and we were parked in an old pickup with a cracked window and my mother was there with her red hair. And in front of us, was a ’37 Chevy, and behind us was a 1939 or ’40 Chrysler and off looking toward the town was a fire as far as I could go east or west. You could smell [the bodies]. I have a perfect image of that with odors and everything and what I see was a B-24 burning eleven people to death. And when I have an image so bright, it means the anxiety was so high.

RV: Right. You said it was an image, the B-24 had crashed and eleven people were burning?

RL: Eleven people were burning to death in the B-24. Interestingly, after thirty, forty years later, I went back to the same spot without ever having been there with my dad, I didn’t know how I did that, it was like an imprint is in my body.

RV: Right.

RL: Anyway, so I saw the worst effects of World War II. I grew up in a little town called Dayton, and I grew up sort of like Tom Sawyer. We had an old farmhouse when I first lived there. It was so cold in the wintertime, that I stuffed the windows. I grew up outdoors running up and down creeks and hiking in the mountains and bicycling out in the country. By 1950, things got better and my dad had a nice business. He was a John Deere dealer, so we were quite well-to-do. And I lived at the edge of town, but I spent all my time in the mountains and the hills and along the creeks. And I went to high school at Dayton High School.

RV: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

RL: Yes, I have a sister and my mother lost a baby. So, my sister, her husband’s a Vietnam Veteran and he’s just starting to open up too, and they live in Olympia.

RV: Okay.

RL: She was three years behind me.

RV: Okay.
RL: And in 1951, we moved to a new house. So I had a good life from then until I left home. But I was strictly an outdoor person. I was active in high school sports and high school sports and plays and clubs and things. It was a small high school, three hundred students.

RV: Before we go there sir, tell me a little bit about your parents. What was your mother like?

RL: My mother grew up in a little town called Touchet, Washington. Her dad was a grocer, but when she grew up in the ‘30s, ‘20s and ‘30s, they didn’t have anything. And she slept on the front porch of a one-bedroom house with her brother. And her dad opened a grocery in 1931, and she was probably fourteen and they eked out an existence there in that house and they had an outhouse and indoor toilet. And she was tall, well she was 5’4” and slim with red, long hair. Quite pretty when she was young and she was athletic in high school too. She was athletic all her life. She bowled and golfed. In Dayton, she was active. Then people without T.V., people had clubs they’d go to during the day and she golfed. But she was a homemaker. She didn’t work. She worked for the welfare department in Washington until my dad and her got married, a little over a year before I was born. And she basically lived that way. My folks moved to Walla Walla when I was in college and that’s where she is now. She’s eighty-five and she survived a heart attack and her mother was alive till she was one hundred and four and she’s got two aunts alive that are one hundred and nine and ninety eight.

RV: Wow. This bodes well for you then, sir.

RL: I hope so.

(Laughter)

RL: And anyway, she’s still active. She still works. She works two days a week at the Senior Center and she plays the piano for a violinist and she’s a writer, just local and papers and she writes poetry also. She belongs to a book club and still drives. But she’s not able to do things, so I go back and forth taking care of the house she lives in. She has a big two-bedroom bungalow house, a Craftsman I think they call it in the old wealthy neighborhood of Walla Walla. The houses around her have maid’s quarters and three stories and all that. Her house was built for the daughter of one of these houses, so
it’s a smaller house, but it’s in a quiet nice neighborhood. I grew up in a quiet nice neighborhood too, with sidewalks and typical ‘50s perfect life, you know.

RV: Right, right. Well tell me about your father. What was he like?

RL: Well my father grew up…his father also came from Touchet and my grandfather was a school teacher and then when he lost his [job]…and so my grandfather was a school teacher when my dad was born, but he lost his job. Because he didn’t have enough education, he opened an electric shop. My dad was raised in Walla Walla in what would today be called poverty, but then probably was called the middle class. They had a small two-bedroom house and he had a brother and a sister, half sister. One’s still alive, his brother is a doctor of physics, but he’s now in a care home. And dad grew up, he was a hard worker, but he never stuck with things. He was very, very talented. He played the violin in the symphony and things like that as a child, but he didn’t want to do things that other people did, so it took him five years to get through high school. Then that was the middle of the Depression. He was almost like the Joe [Okies] that crossed [the U.S.] and went to California. He went down to pick fruit and eked out an existence until he got a job with a tractor company in Walla Walla. And he moved around from Walla Walla to Pendleton to Fina, and got married. During the war, he was a parts man in Walla Walla and he was the last worker there. He ultimately got drafted [but did not have to go], and then they gave away the draft, took away the draft. So he didn’t have to go to the war, his brother did. But we moved to Dayton in 1946. I could remember driving up there through Waitsburg and that little town and our old farmhouse. Now he then…he was only thirty-one. He took over management of the John Deere dealership in Dayton, which was then…Columbia County, was the richest county in the state of Washington. And so when he sold John Deere and CAT, you know, he made a lot of money. And so my dad was quite well respected of the sales that he was honest. He was real honest and John Deere was a good company to work for because they carried farmers through the bad years. So, we did quite well through high school, but it was up and down in farming. Until I got in high school, my dad was an athlete himself. He played basketball. We had a city softball league and he played golf. He was an outdoor person.

RV: Did he influence you with being outdoors and that? Was he a role model?
RL: I did it on my own. I had no other interests. Well, he didn’t do things with me. The things he did, I was too young to do, he did it on his own. I developed the same things, but then I grew up in a place where everybody did that. Hunting and fishing were part of life there, and I hiked in the Wallowas when I was eleven years old, and hunted deer and birds and stuff when I was twelve. I sort of grew up, as I say, like Tom Sawyer making rafts and floating down creeks and hiking in the mountains. As kids, we grew up with all the kids doing things together in the evening and so I grew up in a town where there were true neighborhoods where ladies got together and had tea during the week and where the kids got together and played games until dark and we dated each other’s sisters and ran around with each other’s brothers. And this went on throughout the town. It was a very close town in some ways, but there was no middle class. We were a wealthy town because of the farmers, but people that didn’t have money didn’t have much. So, we had no middle class and we would have been part of an upper-middle class, which included very few people, you know. Since we weren’t landowners, we were sort of on the outside and weren’t invited to the big parties for the wheat farmers and stuff, and the people my folks had to deal with were other business owners and some of the farmers they were friends with. And my mother, I guess she got what would today…she lost a baby and I guess she got what would be called now postpartum depression.

RV: Right.

RL: And so we had a hard time from then on with my mother. My mother would go…she had like a nervous breakdown and so I’d have to go live with friends for a while and this sort of went off and on till I graduated from high school.

RV: Can you tell me sir what kind of jobs you had? Did you work when you were young?

RL: I started working when I was fourteen in an orchard changing sprinkler pipes.

RV: Okay.

RL: I mean, that’s a full time job. I mowed lawns before that. Now we were expected to work. When I sat down the first time I got a job, and I think most kids were told this, my dad says, ‘Nobody gives a damn what you do. They look at what you do as
a reflection of me.’ And he says, ‘If you don’t do good, that reflects on me, not you. So
you better do good or you know what’s going to happen.’

RV: Right.

RL: And so I got a work ethic young and people in my class all got that. In our
lives today, we’ve pulled out and started over with nothing again and again. So we got
that work ethic and I started working in an orchard by putting the tops off of trees so
they’d sprout and changing sprinkler pipe. Then I started driving a tractor and pulling a
sprayer. And when I got to be seventeen, I went to work for Green Giant Company and I
drove swather, cutting peas at nights and I worked right along the dregs of the world.
That gave you a little humility. The local boys drove the tractors. We had four swathers,
two cats, and two loaders and there were about six of us out there.

RV: So, excuse me, a swather. S-w-a-t-h-e-r?

RL: Yeah. It cuts crops and windrows and they were old beat up things made
before World War II and we cut on hills and worked nights, but we worked right
alongside Mexicans from Mexico and we made the same amount of money. The one
man, I worked alongside Jesse James’ great grandson. So, I got to see a side of life of
life, World War II Veterans would talk in our presence of things. It was like we lived in
a separate world. They would talk about their lives as though we weren’t there and these
guys would cut your throat for a nickel, but they separated us out. As long as we didn’t
cross into their world, they didn’t cross into ours. It was a tough way to grow up because
we were out there with pretty rough people and we worked twelve hours, but we rode
both ways in our own time. So it was a fourteen hour day making a buck five an hour.

And I slept during the day in one hundred degree heat and then worked in the cold nights.
When I was a freshman in college, I went to work and put myself through college. First,
I had a Navy Scholarship. I was in the Navy program and then I also had a summer job
working for Green Giant Company as a foreman of their field sampling crew. I had like
thirteen employees.

RV: Right.

RL: And I made enough to go to college, get what clothes I had, and have a
sports car through college doing that.

RV: Okay.
RL: I also worked for the forest service and a little bit logging and during spring breaks, I’d pick up jobs. Basically, I put myself through college with help of the Navy and my grandmother helped me once.

RV: Right.

RL: But I got through college on probably seven thousand dollars at that time. And by keeping my grades up, I could get my out of state tuition back. I went to the University of Idaho.

RV: Well now speaking of grades, tell me about how you were as a student, starting from a young boy all the way up.

RL: Well, I guess I would today be called hyper. They call it attention deficit disorder.

RV: Yes sir.

RL: I had a lot of nervous energy and I know now that I hit a plateau in the first grade. I actually went to a private kindergarten. Then in the first grade, I couldn’t do well, but kids hit plateaus. And about the middle of first grade, I became a good student, a B+ student by not doing anything. I could do it without...just by osmosis and when that happened, I stayed that way right up until it got too hard. I didn’t study at all and I didn’t much study in high school either. So my grades went down in high school. I graduated with a B- average out of high school without doing much studying. I took fairly hard courses. I didn’t get particularly good grades, but on certain things, I did real well.

RV: What were your favorite subjects? What did you enjoy the most?

RL: Definitely history. When I graduated from the eighth grade, the Daughters of the American Revolution came in and gave a test on American history and I guess they gave it to all sixth, seventh, and eighth graders. Oh, I guess it was through sophomore year and I got the best score because we didn’t have T.V. We had a Carnegie Library and I used to take home books four and five at a time. So, by the time I was in the eighth grade, I knew the history of lots of things. Then we took history every year from the third grade till a senior in high school. So, history would’ve been my most interesting course, but writing in English came easy to me and I probably did better there. Possibly because of the reading, I picked up vocabulary and for years, the grading now, I could
spell anything right. Now it seems to be going away. I was sort of a loner; I liked the outdoors. I had friends like myself and all my friends were readers and my mother was a reader and my friend’s fathers were readers. So, books at an early age were a big part of my life and I started collecting them at an early age, some of which I still have.

RV: Okay. Tell me about your sports. You mentioned that you did participate.

RL: I played football. Well, I started by boxing when I was in junior high, but they outlawed it when I was a freshman and I was too small. You had to be a certain minimum weight before you could box at all and I was too small and they outlawed it, so I played football, ran on a track team, and of course, as a freshman, I didn’t get a letter until I was a sophomore and I got it in track. And as far as current times, I wasn’t very fast. I ran as a senior and we didn’t have any divisions in track, so a school like mine would run against a school of two thousand students and we did fairly well against them. We had a group of kids that grew up together, so we were number two in the state in football my senior year and undefeated and rated my junior year and we were playing in a league of three hundred to eight hundred and we only had three hundred and four students, so we were good in sports. A sport I could’ve been good in, basketball, I didn’t turn out with until I was a senior and I was eleventh man on the team. But I was active in sports other than that. And I was in outdoor sports, because I hunted and fished. As a matter of fact, my whole life was outdoors; bicycling, sports, you name it. We had football, we had little football games, you know, a basketball. So, basically my life was outdoors in sports from the time I toddled across the street into the forest when I was two years old in Walla Walla and it’s been that way always. But in a sense, either I was that way naturally and my personality was that way or affected my personality because I was never comfortable around groups of people. I tended to say things and do things that would distance myself, never really being comfortable as an ‘in’ part of a group.

RV: Right, okay.

RL: I’m an independent. I was comfortable as a fighter pilot.

RV: Okay. So, was it expected that you would go to college or was this something…?

RL: It was expected by my father, it was not expected by me. I like that town, I liked that little town and I still like it. I always wanted to go back, but the reality is, I did
go back once and I saw that I had no future. I quit college, and went back and worked.
And I could see that if I had went to work for my father, I’d do okay, but I never could
work for him. He was too critical, and so I went on. It was expected by my father I
would go to college.

RV: What year did you graduate high school? I’m sorry for interrupting.


RV: 1960, okay.

RL: 1960, and it was expected I go to college. I also had an uncle, which is rare
who went to college. He was a Ph.D. in physics and he still is a Ph.D. in physics. He
graduated from Rice Institute and he worked first just for a while for Boeing, but then he
worked in Wisconsin at the Institute of Paper Research in Chemistry. Then he was a
professor at the University of Western Illinois in Macomb until he retired. So we did
have education in our family, but nobody else. When I went to school, you know, it was
suggested that I take business and get out of state and everything, and I just didn’t feel
comfortable going into the business world. I saw what my dad had to do in business.
You know, you got to give to everybody [had to get along with everybody] and I was just
too independent to do that. So, I wanted a farm a ranch, but I didn’t have a relative that
had one and I couldn’t afford to buy one, and that was why people went to forestry school
when I went. They were farmers’ [kids] and small town kids who had no place of their
own. And so I decided I’d become a forester so I could work outside as a forester or a
surveyor. And that’s why I went to Forestry School, for the independence, but it was a
good education because it was a scientific education.

RV: Right.

RL: And it’s exactly the education you need to be an intelligence officer and it
allowed me to do things subsequently in my life, that education with all the statistics and
everything because forestry, what you have is not what you worry about. What you think
about is the past and the future and you have to determine the past and the future by
analysis of what you’ve got now. That’s exactly what you do in intelligence work. And
so my forestry education fit right in with the Marine Corps.

RV: Right. Let me ask you a couple of questions before we move into college
life. What did you think of the Korean War?
RL: I remember being scared. And the reason I was scared was because of what I saw in World War II.
RV: Right.
RL: And I was hearing it on the radio and seeing it in the newspaper, we didn’t have television, but I was just afraid that the same thing was going to happen that happened in World War II, that there was going to be plane crashes and soldiers in the hospital.
RV: Now did you get to see the soldiers in the hospital during World War II?
RL: Yeah. I mean, I saw them by the hundreds, thousands. The hospital was where the VA Hospital is now, which is an old Calvary Fort. And they had the wards lined up in barracks buildings and the whole end opened up. In warm weather, they opened the whole end of that building up and you could look down the wards and they were all strung up, the men in white.
RV: Right.
RL: And they had a big fence around it with guard dogs and soldiers and guards at the base, it was terrifying to go by there. I remember being scared to death, you know.
RV: So you could actually walk by there and look down in the ward?
RL: We drove by, but it was on the old highway to Touchet, south of Walla Walla and we drove by and that hospital was open until…I must’ve been six or seven years old, so I saw it a lot of times. And then the patients would be out, they were all swathed in white. It was an Asiatic Pacific Hospital and then those men came to our homes, not my home, but they came to homes around the area. They married people in the town, and so I saw casualties up close. And when we went by there, it was scary and I can remember as a child walking out of movies frightened when there were hospital scenes and when there was fire, big fires.
RV: Yes.
RL: I was always terrified of fire after [seeing that plane crash at the age of 26 months]. I didn’t know that, but if the movies had people burning to death and big hospitals, I’d get so scared, I’d have to leave the movie when I was growing up. So, that definitely had an affect on me. I don’t think you know what you can see…have you ever seen a casualty ward in a war?
RV: Yes, I have actually.

RL: Yeah, well you know what they’re like.

RV: Yes, there are many, many individuals with many different injuries.

RL: I mean, these guys were all strung up, you know. To a three, four, five, six-year-old child, this was terribly traumatic to see hundreds and thousands of men strung up and going around in wheelchairs. And I started blocking things out then. I usually have very vivid images and those images are blurred. Apparently, that’s the first time I started actually numbing out because later on, I did block things out.

RV: Well, obviously you were using a defense mechanism as a youth and just trying to protect yourself.

RL: Well, it was terrifying. You know, there was no explanation to me. I don’t know that I knew a World War II was on. I mean, I knew it was later, but at the time, I was just a little boy and I can remember when the men came home from the war and my uncle came home and everything and I was pretty affected. That’s why when Korea came, I was afraid. I was afraid of the same things.

RV: Right, right.

RL: And I was afraid at movies. We had a lot of war movies and I was afraid at movies, especially the hospital scenes.

RV: So, Korea, you remember being frightened.

RL: I remember being frightened, yes.

RV: Did you follow the war, the news; you were what about eight, nine, ten years old?

RL: My memories of the war at that time are tainted by the fact that we studied Korea intensely in college. So, I read about it after the war and there were movies and things, but I don’t think I knew too much about it.

RV: Okay.

RL: I do remember some things. I do remember when we had a retreat from North Korea

RV: Yes.

RL: I can remember when they fired MacArthur because I was in the fifth grade and he ran for president and all the kids got to vote.
RV: (Laughter)

RL: And there was three people running. I think it was Stevenson, MacArthur, Eisenhower. So I do remember a little bit about that, yes.

RV: Okay.

RL: That’s when Ridgeway took over.

RV: Right, exactly. So 1960, you graduated high school and are you off to college that fall or did you take some time?

RL: No, I went to college and I can remember I had a ’54 Buick. I bought that from my dad, and so I had a nice car and when I drove off to college, I can remember thinking, ‘I’m leaving one life for another.’ You know, and for all practical purposes except coming home to work and things, I never did go back home and that’s the way kids were then. They left when they were out of high school and that was it, you know. It wasn’t like today. You know, we didn’t have big houses and even though we were wealthy, we didn’t have all that much money to take care of a kid who can take care of himself.

RV: Yes sir.

RL: And so when the kids left, they had a work ethic and they just went on. And that’s the way it was, we didn’t look back.

RV: Okay. Tell me about your first year there in college. What was that like for you?

RL: Well, I was scared. My teachers told me that if I did in college what I did in high school, I wouldn’t be there very long.

RV: Okay.

RL: And so when I went, I decided I was probably going to flunk out so I worked hard. My first year in college, I was an honor student and got about a three point. I think I got a 2.9 the first semester, just less than a three point then a 3.3 and I never much dropped below that. I would vary from 3.2 to 3.6 all through college.

RV: Okay.

RL: I graduated Cum Laude.

RV: Okay, how was the University of Idaho? Was it a good experience?
RL: I don’t like being around people and I didn’t like college. I didn’t like the
discipline of having to study.

RV: Right.

RL: I didn’t like to sit there for hours and hours and hours. I found college
stressful. I still have nightmares about going in and finding out that they’re having a test
and I’m not prepared.

(Laughter)

RV: Okay.

RL: And walking across the stage, they don’t give me a degree because I forgot a
course, you know.

RV: Right.

RL: It was hard for me. I was carrying up to twenty-one credits. I was in the
Navy and I was working. I worked in the dormitory and so I quit for a quarter after my
first year because I was going to join the Coast Guard or something, but when I went
back, I went for two quarters to the University of Washington, then I went back to Idaho
and finished. But I didn’t like it; I never liked it. I went home every four weeks just to
get away.

RV: Oh really?

RL: Yeah. The only thing I really liked is I got to fly through college.

RV: Right, right.

RL: I flew my first jet as a freshman.

RV: Now tell me about that. Tell me about, first your interests in flying and then
secondly, joining the ROTC there at the University of Idaho.

RL: Okay, well I grew up right by that airport.

RV: Yes sir.

RL: And after the war, my gosh, my little town, there must’ve been forty or fifty
fighter pilots and war pilots came back and that little town, we knew what people did in
the war and so I always….and then there were the movies and the books. I started
reading books and the first books I read are people who not fought before World War II,
‘The Flying Tigers’, who flew in China and stopped Japan and the people I’ve always
looked up to as the heroes in my life and that’s the British Army and Air Force, The Battle of Britain, who stopped Germany alone, you know.

RV: Yes.

RL: And so that’s where I got it. I wanted to fly a Spitfire in the Battle of Britain. I still do.

RV: (Laughter)

RL: And interestingly, when I focused and when I had to really fight something, that’s who I focused on. I focused on that if those people could do that, those pilots, that I could do whatever I did and twice I wrote to the Queen of England and said, ‘This is the 50th year, this is the 60th year, and here’s what I’ve done and thank you for this.’ And I got immediate thank you letters back.

RV: That’s great.

RL: You know, those are the only two people [left] in public [service] that fought at that time. She was an ambulance driver and he was on a destroyer. So, anyways, that’s where my first interest in flying came was from the Flying Tigers…actually, they were pilots of the Free World flying in the Battle of Britain.

RV: Yes sir. Yes sir, I can remember as a youth thinking the exact same thing, reading about those Spitfire pilots and being amazed at what they were doing.

RL: Yeah, well, those of us who grew up after World War II got a little different history than kids today. I knew for example that the United States didn’t win the war, Russia and England and Poland and everybody was working together.

RV: Right.

RL: And I knew about Montgomery and El Alamein and that we came in and what we did was our industrial might that supplied England to keep her going. So right after the war when I was educated, we got a real good education about recent history, recent history from say the time of our revolution to the time I lived in, which kids don’t get today at all. And we also got a real good education in geography so that we knew where these things were happening and kids don’t get that either.

RV: Yes sir. Tell me about the first time you flew a plane, flew in a plane.

RL: Well I was four years old.

RV: Wow. Do you remember it?
RL: Yeah. Well, maybe five. I think it was a four-place piper cub and we flew out of Dayton. I remember doing it, but I don’t have real memory. I was four, then I worked with airplanes a little bit flagging in the fields. Those were biplanes and I didn’t fly those. Okay, the first time I was in an airplane was when I was a freshman in college and during the spring vacation; I flew in a C-54 down to Corpus Christi, Texas. What they were doing is [showing] people in the Navy program that wanted to fly started getting to fly as a freshman. And so I flew down there in that plane, low altitude, bumping around, people sick and I flew to Corpus Christi in an F-9, F-8 out over the Gulf of Mexico. Actually got to fly the plane and I got to see the Gulf of Mexico and what it looked like from a jet at eighteen, twenty thousand feet. I saw ships sunk by the Germans off World War II; you can see them in the water out there. And it was beautiful flying in the plane and I wasn’t scared at all. I mean, it was exciting and the pilot was also an ROTC, he was a Marine, Marine pilot from Chicago area as I recall. And that was the first time I really got…and I could fly the jet. It’s fairly simple to fly a jet. The hard part is the thinking that goes with it. And so I actually flew the jet and flew over the ocean and beach and things. And then I guess the next year, I went down again, I flew an S2-F. And then my senior year, the Navy put you through flight training to see if you’d make a good pilot in college. So I actually had a pilot’s license when I got in college.

RV: Okay. When did you first get interested in joining ROTC at Idaho?

RL: Well, first off, it was mandatory at land grant colleges.

RV: Okay.

RL: And I started out not knowing anything about it. But when I got there, I spent my first quarter, my first semester in the Air Force, then I switched over to the Navy because I always wanted to fly as a Navy pilot and I never regretted it. I never regretted going into the Navy program because it was a far different program than the Air Force and Army or ROTC. When you went into the Navy program, you were in the Navy. You were a midshipman and you were a midshipman just like in the Academy. The only thing is you were a midshipman in the Navy Reserve and not in the United States Navy at the Academy, and you had an appointment from the Navy instead of an appointment from a congressman.

RV: Right.
RL: So, I went through that program interested in flying for the Navy and also interested in forestry, so the two went together and a lot of the courses crossed over. You had to have the math, the physics, the chemistry that you had to have for the Navy, all got it in forestry. So actually, I go back to wanting to be a Navy pilot clear back from being…I can remember wanting to fly a Corsair [WWII Fighter], you know. The plane I always wanted to fly was a Spitfire, but the Corsair came next. So I can never remember not wanting to be a pilot.

RV: How was it with the ROTC military discipline in college? Did you deal with that okay?

RL: Yeah I did. I knew what I was getting into from having read things. The fact that you were expected to do something had been beaten into me, was a work ethic by a long time. So I was expected to excel. The only mistake I made is switching over to the Marine Corps and I did that so I could get out of college a year earlier because I ended up with conflict of courses and I already had to go five years to get through forestry, I didn’t want to go six. So after my third year, I switched from the Navy program to the Marine program.

RV: Now why would you call it a mistake?

RL: I don’t think I ever felt [a part of the Marines]…I was too independent to fit into the gung ho [attitude]. I’m too independent and too much of a free thinker to fit into the gung ho, hi diddle diddle up the middle stuff. I thought things out.

(Laughter)

RL: And I also could fire a rifle and knew what you could do going hi diddle diddle up the middle.

RV: Yes sir.

RL: I always disagreed with that tactic, always; even in the war I disagreed with that because we took a lot of casualties when we didn’t need to. I didn’t have that gung ho attitude, but I did recognize the need for a lot of good training and the training in the Marine Corps was superb, not only for the Marine Corps, but for the rest of your life.

RV: Right.

RL: Before I ever got out of college, I’d gone to OCS in addition to the Navy program; I already was a person who would not give up.
RV: Right.

RL: And boy, they beat that into you. I mean, in fact, you just don’t give up. When they tell you to do something, you don’t say, ‘I’m not going to do it.’ You analyze, you analyze how you’re going to do it and you make a decision and do it. It just comes natural, it doesn’t fit always in your life later on, but it is a type of training that gives you strength, for officers anyway.

RV: You went to OCS while you were at Idaho?

RL: Well, you see, in the Navy program, you go through college. You also go in the summer.

RV: Right.

RL: And you go on ships and because I got in late, I only had to go one summer.

RV: Okay.

RL: And I ended up with a reserve commission because of it because I dropped the regular and took the reserve, so I could only go [5 years]…and that summer instead of going out on a ship or something, they send you through OCS just like you didn’t go through ROTC and they did kick people out maybe out of the Marine Corps and put them back in the Navy at OCS. It was just like eight weeks of infantry training. I mean, bad.

RV: What year was this sir? Was this summer of what, ’64?

RL: Summer of ’64 in Quantico, Virginia.

RV: Yes.

RL: And it was traumatic to me. I knew it was going to be, but it was traumatic anyway.

RV: Right.

RL: The first morning, we had a train that went right by the barracks; the main train into Washington probably went six feet from our barracks.

RV: Wow.

RL: I woke up and the first time that thing…everybody was rolling out of bed, it looked like it was coming right down the middle of the squad bay. They woke us up with firecrackers for six straight weeks, eight straight weeks I guess; we were going up and down the hills and firing rifles and there was no tomorrow.

RV: Right.
RL: And it was at one hundred degrees. You know, you square away real quick there because you can’t fight the system there, the system will eat you up.

RV: Right.

RL: And so they do change you. They do change you real quick; they won’t let you give up.

RV: Right.

RL: You don’t quit; you do it until you do it.

RV: Tell me about that kind of training. What did you do, what was a typical day like there?

RL: It started at daybreak…and [the first] daybreak; I don’t know when it started, never ended. (Laughter)

RV: Right.

RL: It started at daybreak and you got up and…boy, I can’t hardly remember. You got up and everything, we march. We formed and we marched to breakfast in formation. Then we marched back and then we did things during the day, all sorts of things. We fought with bayonets and rifles and marched and ran and climbed hills and hiked. Then we went to classes and the worst thing you could do is fall asleep in class. You were so tired, you couldn’t [stay awake]…and some of the classes, the classes were infantry training and then one day, if you wanted to be a pilot, they took you in there in one hundred degree heat and you took a test to see if you could get in and you were so tired, it was hard to do the test. It just was basically, I went in one day and six, eight, six, eight, eight, six weeks, I can’t remember which. Anyway, you came out and sit like one day because days [just kept going], just like in combat, days end at midnight and the Marine Corps didn’t end at midnight. It went to all night. Usually, we would get off after dinner at night to come in and clean up. We had to clean up and clean the boots and everything, of course your rifle and that’s when you did that in the evening. And you could go over and get a beer if you had time. There was a little club there, but basically, there wasn’t time to do anything but keep going for the Marine Corps. And there were times when you marched all night and came in, took a shower, got back and walked out and marched to class.

RV: Wow.
RL: And they pushed you to the limit. People who couldn’t take the physical
[part] were dropped out.
RV: How did you do physically?
RL: I was okay as far as keeping up with the stamina. What I didn’t have
was…and this was typical with a lot of people. I didn’t have the upper body strength a
lot of people had, so I couldn’t do one hundred push-ups or sit-ups. Some people could
and so I could do the stamina part of it. I’m tall and thin and that’s not the type
of…doesn’t give you the upper body strength, but I didn’t have any trouble. At the end,
we had contests; everybody had to be in something. I was in the running team, where we
ran three miles with pack and rifles, and they picked the top seven. So I could keep up
with the stamina. I didn’t have the upper body strength, and a lot of people there were
muscle builders, swimmers, and things like that and I wasn’t. I was an outdoor person,
and I ran one year in college. But I was a lot really smaller, maybe, in build than a lot of
them, but I didn’t have any trouble with the stamina.
RV: Okay. What was discipline like?
RL: Oh, like cutting it with a knife.
(Laughter)
RL: Discipline in the Marine Corps always was that way. Even as pilots where it
was different, you didn’t push things too far. Discipline there was…I mean, everything
was by the numbers. The only time you had off was Saturday afternoon after about the
second week until Sunday night. And we’d go into Washington and basically sleep. And
we were right on the Potomac and it was hot, hot and humid. And it was tough. It was
worse than going through boot camp because instead of harassment being as a group,
there were harassment toward individuals who tried to break you.
RV: Right.
RL: So if they could pick out a weakness and they tried to pick a weakness out of
me, you got a lot more harassment than other people. But in the end, you were pretty
much a team that worked together.
RV: What did they try to find in you? What were they trying to…you said they
picked a weakness in you?
RL: Oh, I wasn’t familiar with the [USMC]…a lot more guys there were a lot
more familiar with the Marines and I wasn’t.

RV: Right.

RL: So, I was a little uncomfortable and they sensed that and boy, they really
came after me. And not just me, it wasn’t just me.

RV: Right.

RL: And it went on for [the eight weeks]…it didn’t go on for very long. But
anything, they’d pick stuff and what happened is the people like me that originally did
that…they didn’t, they left me alone. There were people whose weakness showed up
over the time. We had one guy…maybe a couple, three, who started out looking great,
but ended up [bad and] probably if there hadn’t been a war on, coming, they would’ve
probably not made it.

RV: Right.

RL: But they looked great in the beginning and that’s what that type of training
does. You don’t just end there; you go six months to basic school doing the same thing
later if it’s the same thing there. The longer you work, the weak sisters tend to show up
among the groups. You know, so I didn’t ever fit in with the Ground Forces, but I did fit
in with the Aviation Forces and that was generally true in the Marine Corps.

RV: So when you got back to Idaho, you had one more year left.

RL: Yeah.

RV: And you were ready when you graduated to go into active service?

RL: When I graduated, I was a second lieutenant.

RV: Okay, all right.

RL: And I got orders by mistake to Quantico, Virginia, which is basic infantry
training. When I took a reserve commission, I was supposed to go to Pensacola, so I
became a trained infantry officer by mistake.

RV: Oh really?

RL: Yeah.

RV: In 1965 when you graduated?

RL: Yeah. I was supposed to go to Pensacola and become a pilot.

RV: Right.
RL: And I didn’t. I went to Pensacola [Quantico] supposedly to get a physical. I went to Quantico to get a physical to go to Pensacola, but when I got there, it took two weeks even to talk to anybody and finally when I went in to talk to a colonel, he said, ‘Lieutenant, the Marine Corps doesn’t make mistakes. Get out.’ And that was the end of my…six months in infantry training. (Laughing) I became a trained infantry officer.

RV: Wow, wow.

RL: Which haunted me from then on. Then I had to reapply for flight school. So, I ended up going out of college into six straight months of infantry training right at the start of the Vietnam War.

RV: Right, what was that like?

RL: We know we were going to war and surprisingly enough, everybody out of college didn’t seem to give a damn. They screwed off and played grab ass. As I say, we worried about the war when we got to it, but we knew it was going to happen.

RV: Right.

RL: I didn’t do very well there because of my personality. I don’t feel comfortable being in a group and I wasn’t going to say I was gung ho in the Marine Corps. That wasn’t true, I was there for the training, I’m an analytical person. And the other thing, that I was married with a child by then.

RV: Oh really?

RL: I got married in college, yeah, illegally; we weren’t supposed to be married. But then a lot of us got married anyway.

RV: What do you mean illegally?

RL: You couldn’t be married as a midshipman.

RV: Really?

RL: Yeah, no. One time you couldn’t be married as a second lieutenant either, but I did, I got married anyway. Anyway, and there were quite a few people that showed up at Quantico from the Navy, even the Academy immediately put children on their, you know, one and even two children on their records when they were only commissioned two weeks before.

RV: Right.
RL: You know, so I was married when I got there, but my wife had to stay home. She had a baby then. And so when I got there, the first day I felt out of place, but I got used to it, but I never really fit in with the core group, the gung ho, charge up the hills [type]. And these people were quite immature, too. I had fought forest fires and I had worked as a foreman out with the toughest people, you know, in the woods and stuff. I had a lot more experience in dealing with people as a manager over difficult people than they had. They were still this gung ho and I just wasn’t that way and they perceived me as not being worth a damn, but when I had the…they’d assign you billets, I did okay. But I didn’t do well in Basic School. I graduated number two in my class in college and bottom ten percent at Basic School

RV: Wow.

RL: However, I was a pilot too.

RV: Right, right.

RL: Okay, and pilots weren’t considered real Marines by the infantry. As I say, I graduated at the bottom of my class at Basic School and four months later, number two in my class in pre-flights.

RV: So did you go right down to Pensacola after that six months?

RL: Well, yeah. I got orders to Pensacola and I went down and I checked into the Naval Air Station at Pensacola on January 1st in 1966. And everybody was on leave yet except the three or four of us who had families and lived too far away. There weren’t many people [officers] that had children. You know, maybe one out of twenty. Anyway, but there were three of us that went from Basic School to flight training and there wasn’t any class to start. So what they did is put us in the class that was starting, which was all foreign students. So I went through pre flight with the entire Naval Air Arm of Peru and Ethiopia, about thirty-five Vietnamese students.

RV: My gosh.

RL: I mean, then there was a couple of Navy people that were becoming Naval Aviators after being Naval Flight Officers. So there was only about five Americans.

RV: Wow.

RL: But they were pretty sharp. It was a hard course. I never had anything thrown at me so fast as in pre flight.
RV: Right.

RL: When you are given something one day and have to do it the next, it’s hard to learn.

RV: Yes.

RL: And I studied hard and as I say, I was married then. We had a house and I knew people in my class from Basic School, but I think I was the only Marine pilot. No, there were two Marine pilots. I can’t remember. They had also people go through pre-flight that’d go to become Radar Intercept Operators in Phantoms. So, I was with two other Marines and a couple of Navy people and then all these foreign students and some of them I got to know. But I had to study hard, harder than college, much harder. And you had to know it cold. For example, even to get in the door, they gave you tests that equaled a couple of years of college math and a year of college physics.

RV: Right.

RL: That’s just to walk in the door, okay. And then from then on, they’d just throw it at you; aerodynamics and engines and you had to learn how all these real technical stuff and you had to pretty much commit it to some sort of image so you could draw it back. But I think that if you can study in college, you can study there.

RV: Right.

RL: The other thing is, they have teaching processes that make you learn faster, a program text. They had it canned, you know, so that you were only focusing on what you needed, not all the extraneous stuff. So I did okay and we had a survival thing where we went out for three days or four days and starved and I was there in the wintertime. And when you graduated from then, everybody went to Saufley Field and in Saufley Field, you flew the T-34. Everybody flew that that was going to become a pilot and since I’d already flown planes like it, I aced the course most academically and everything. I graduated with…they had a four point scale; I think I got a 3.6. Okay, and then they take you out of Saufley, that’s where it determines what kind of plane you fly and basically they cut the top Marines, about the top four or five percent, they cut them off and send them to the jets. Everybody else goes to helicopters. Okay, and so I did make the cut and I went to Meridian, Mississippi and I lived in a house in town. I was there during when James Meredith was shot and when they killed those people and buried them in a dam.
RV: Yes.

RL: I was right in the middle of it. We had the Mennonite church across the street and then the Salvation Army and all that. So, it sort of went [on] around me, but that was going on there. I actually flew over that march in an airplane, but that’s where I learned to fly a jet.

RV: Okay, well let’s stop here for a second. Let me ask you a couple of questions about historical events that you witnessed or had a chance to witness and actually that was when you mentioned Meridian, Mississippi, I assume this is 1966.

RL: Yes.

RV: Yeah, I thought about that. First of all, the assassination of John Kennedy, 1963.

RL: I was in geology class and I was in a staunchly republican region. Boy, and when he was killed, the instructor said, ‘Is that right?’ And started on with the lecture.

RV: Wow, wow. How did you feel about it personally?

RL: I didn’t like John Kennedy at all. I was in a staunchly republican area; I was a republican myself. However, I didn’t have a chance to do anything because there was no reaction around me.

RV: Right.

RL: I mean, it was sort of like hitting the My Lai. It hit us and when I found out My Lai, it hit me and then everything went on and I didn’t have time to deal with it. And I remember where I was, you know, and I remember we got out of school and I went home and everything was sad and everything on T.V. But it didn’t hit me as painful.

RV: Okay. Tell me, what was the atmosphere in Meridian, Mississippi like?

RL: Well, I didn’t fight the system. I lived right in the community. They didn’t have any housing for pilots, so our second lieutenants and the Marines and our ensigns and lieutenant jg’s, we lived out in town right with the problems, you know, in a black neighborhood and everything. Same way in Pensacola. I mean, I knew the situation, I didn’t argue with them. We had people killed, pilots killed both at Texas and Meridian by walking in a bar just trying to drink, got beat up and everything. So, I pretty much kept in my own group of people. I did have neighbors, I had one neighbor who was a
radio announcer and the other who was a retired sergeant, dyed-in-the-wool Mississippians and people here, and I’ll tell you that their feelings as blacks was basically, you know, they just didn’t exist.

RV: Right.

RL: As a matter of fact, they didn’t exist. I once was running in the field across the street and I went through the trees and there was a black neighborhood there. Well, I didn’t know it was only two hundred yards from my house because no black kid ever came through those trees and everywhere I lived, even in Pensacola, there was a big high fence at the end, I could look over at once and there was a black neighborhood. It was separate. Interestingly, I went back to reunions, and it’s not that way anymore.

RV: Right.

RL: But anyway, everything was separate; bathrooms, his/hers and their’s. You know, and drinking fountains, colored and white, and Mississippi was… as I said that, [uptight], while I was there, they shot James Meredith. We flew over that march, you know, trying to see it. It was down a highway just not too far from our base.

RV: Yes.

RL: Five or ten miles maybe and I flew down the highway to watch it. I don’t know that I saw it. But then, I learned about those people being murderers later. That was there too.

RV: Right.

RL: But I’ll tell you something, stuff went on in Meridian that just left you cold. There was a motel, it looked like a normal motel out of town, okay, and lights and everything. You walked in there and there was nobody. There was nobody to serve you and just a motel with nobody in it. But it stayed there, it was motel with lights and everything, something was going on, I didn’t know what, so much you didn’t go by and go back again. And certain things weren’t discussed and I didn’t know what they were because they were the other people from the south, not discussing them around me.

RV: Did you find out what was happening?

RL: No.

RV: Some people would talk and some people wouldn’t. It was not something we talked about. They had their views and I had no views.
RV: Right.

RL: The blacks I grew up with in my hometown, one made shoes...one fixed shoes and one worked for a railroad and I never thought too much about them being different. You know, so my first view of blacks is in the south and they were pretty much separate. We had blacks in the Marines with us and they pretty much stuck with us, you know.

RV: Yeah, how were they treated by the other Marines?

RL: Well, we were considered...I don't know. Not all Marines thought like I did. They weren't all treated good by other Marines. I had two commanding officers who were black. I used to hear some of the southern boys talk and they didn't talk too much to people like me. The people who tended to criticize and look on people like me were people from the Northeast. The one upmanship, 'I always travel first class in an airplane, I live...we prepped at so and so...what's your family do.' I mean, this stuff you know?

RV: Right.

RL: 'Now how much money does your dad...' everything was based on some sort of status system. See, they didn't have prep schools where I grew up, and so they could not identify with people from the northwest, the west in general, and so they tended to like put us down.

RV: They certainly couldn't identify with the folks from the south either.

RL: Folks from the south have a different...they have a different status system. For example, in the south, I was a gentleman; I was a military officer.

RV: Right.

RL: In the south, you have a family background, but you also have a job. In the south, of the three people that are looked up to at that time were military officer, a physician, and a preacher. Those three people had status. Where I grew up, the landowners and businessman...and money where I grew up was not something that was particularly looked on because the people with money didn't show it, but the people from the northeast, money was what they focused on, because their lifestyle was based totally on income. And the people from the Midwest were somewhere in between...it's funny; our pilots came largely from the west coast. I'd say three quarters of our pilots came
from somewhere in the West and I think that’s because in the west, during World War II
and the time we were growing up, that’s where all the aviation was, Boeing and
McDonnell all over. All over, I saw airplanes from the time I was a little kid and in from
the south, that’s where your big infantry people in the Northeast. Those southerners, boy,
the Marine Corps for them, that was like god and they were infantry, artillery, and tanks.
And the people from the west that I knew were into aviation and that sort, largely of the
aviation. We had like four pilots from Washington State in Vietnam out of sixteen. So I
think that your upbringing had to do with where you fit in the Marines.

RV: Right. And by the time you got to Meridian in 1966, what were your views
on what was going on in Southeast Asia?

RL: I knew I was going to go there. I already had seen the films from there.

RV: Right.

RL: I knew it was going to happen, but I figured the war would probably be over
by the time I got there, or hoped anyway. But I did not particularly think about it. I
didn’t particularly think about it because I had enough to do where I was and it was pretty
much an unknown. We got intelligence of course, but let’s say something happened to
me. Well, I got in the Naval Hospital, I had taken the Intelligence Course, my first
intelligence analysis was of this six day war because I got out at the end of April of 1967,
so I was put analyzing intelligence reports of planned war between Israel and the Arab
world, so that was what I was studying at the time. So I didn’t know much about
Vietnam. The Arab-Israeli War took my first…my first intelligence analysis came from
that war and nothing in Vietnam. So I knew what was happening in Vietnam, it was a
jungle war, but I went to Vietnam before I got there permanently as a pilot, so I knew
when I finally did go what it was going to be like. But I went there as a ferry pilot before
I went there on orders.

RV: Right. Okay. Well, let’s talk about your specific training at Meridian.

What did you do there?

RL: Well, you start out just like everything. You start learning to fly the plane.
A jet plane doesn’t have immediate thrust and it goes faster than you can think. So you
have to learn to think ahead of the plane and that takes energy, a lot of energy.

RV: Which airplane was this?
RL: It was called the T-2A Buckeye, they still use a version of that or they did. But anyway, it was about a three hundred knot jet straight wing with wing tanks. It was fairly easy to fly. Straight wings don’t break away stall. We learned first to take off and land and we went from takeoff and landing to instruments to formation flying and when you learn to fly formation flights, you graduated and then you went to Pensacola and you did air-to-air gunnery and you hit the boat, you hit the aircraft carrier and the T-2, okay. And that was the basic T-2 training and we started our briefs at 4:00 in the morning and we had to end at 10:00 at night and we flew night flying and we lost…we started losing people there.

RV: And this is at Meridian or you went to Meridian to Pensacola?

RL: Right, and from Pensacola to Kingsville.

RV: Okay.

RL: Okay, at Kingsville, you’re in a swept-wing jet.

RV: Okay.

RL: That was the cougar jet [a simple jet]; later, the A-4 that I flew in combat. And each of those times, well, we went TAD to Pensacola, my wife and I and I liked that, that was great because we were flying out over the ocean and shooting at the banner and landing on an aircraft carrier and it was sort of free because we were getting extra pay. We didn’t have our furniture and stuff, that was in transit to somewhere else, so we were sort of living like out of a suitcase and sort of a free time. And the flying was great, it was good weather and flying over the ocean and it was beautiful. I used to watch those T-2s taking off at six o’clock, seven o’clock in the morning, one right after the other, six of them taking off and turning out over the ocean and that was a pre flight and then I was doing it. I just loved doing that.

RV: Did you consider yourself a natural pilot?

RL: I didn’t know. I didn’t know until later what I did well and what I didn’t do well. I wasn’t a natural pilot in some ways in that it took me a while to break in. First off, you learn to fly by the numbers. Then there’s a period when you don’t fly and you do good then, but then there’s a transition period where you start flying by feel where you’re not so good then, you get to flying better and the more you fly, the more [better] you get. The people…you’re not a bad pilot or the fact that you’re in the top five percent
to start with, but I would say that I was an average jet pilot. The average jet pilot is what
you want to be. You don’t want to be the top dog; the top and the bottom are the ones
that get killed. For example, I used to take flak because in combat, I didn’t make the
standard runs in napalm and bombing, I stayed high and came in. Why put yourself in
ground fire all the time? I also gave myself more fuel. You got to remember, when I was
in flight training, I punched out of a plane, went into a fireball and didn’t get a chute. I
did that before I went to the war.

RV: Wow. Describe that incident, what happened, when was this?
RL: This was in Kingsville in March 19, 1967.
RV: Okay.
RL: I was just about done and I was going out on a bombing hop, my first
bombing hop, and I was number two of a six plane flight; number one went down and I
went out and I took the lead and I had an instructor with me because it was my first flight
and I pushed the throttle forward and the plane lifts off and those old F-9s just staggered
in the air and I got to about four hundred feet and I heard this loud metallic clunk and I
looked up and I was looking at the ground tacau station and the plane was pitching over
and I tried to pull the stick back, and then I slipped up and ejected. Then everything went
into slow motion and I saw the seat above me and then I rolled slowly over and I saw the
plane go into the ground and this big wall of fire and then I looked up and I didn’t have a
chute and I looked down and I went into the fireball and then I don’t remember anything
for a long time. I woke up, I was already up on my knees and I was right in the middle of
a fireball, I couldn’t see and I was being burned badly and something dark showed up and
I ran, and that turned out to be an avenue in the fire about five feet wide, maybe a wind
gust, but the flames would roll out and just cut me like a knife. And when I ran out, my
chute must’ve opened because the faster I ran, the closer the fire. Finally I turned around,
sapped my chute out, you know. There was only about six feet of the shrouds left and I
pulled that off. We were well trained; I knew I was in shock.

RV: Right.
RL: Okay, my watch had burned through my arm; I could see that, I could see the
skin hanging down.

RV: Ugh.
RL: And I was bleeding and got hit by part of the explosion. I walked over to the
other pilot and instinctively knew not to touch him. He had hit, I think in his seat and
then the chute opened and pulled him out and he was broken in the middle and you don’t
touch someone with a hurt back.
RV: Right.
RL: A helicopter came in then and they went for him and they dumped me off in
front of the tower, they couldn’t see the injuries, nobody came to get me, so finally I went
and somebody took me up to the dispensary there, the air station there at Kingsville and
all of a sudden I said, ‘You know, I want a shot of morphine.’ And they had to cut my
stuff. I still had my G-suit. No, I didn’t have G-suit. I guess I had taken it off, but what
happened is the nylon stuff melted through my flight suit, and so I was burned on my
legs, arms, face, my oxygen mask had melted to my face, but I had it on, so I was
breathing oxygen. I was burned over thirty percent of my body and then I started to
stiffen up and they put me in the ambulance and I can remember that ambulance ride
because people would look and point. You know what they were doing? They were
laughing.
RV: Laughing?
RL: Yeah. Why would they do that? You know, well of course, it was on radio.
Yeah, those people were laughing in the cars.
RV: As you went?
RL: Yeah, they were laughing and smiling when they’d point to me, you know,
because it was on radio. I never understood that.
RV: In the back of the ambulance?
RL: I was at the back of the ambulance; they were in cars going by.
RV: Could they see you?
RL: Yeah, it was a big open ambulance; about a ‘68 Pontiac; the whole side was
glass.
RV: Okay.
RL: You know, maybe it’s a nervous [reaction], I don’t know, but I can
remember that because I didn’t know if I was going to live or not.
RV: Right.
RL: Two pilots just got burned and died, they both died when I was in the hospital and I didn’t want to go to San Antonio and they kept me at Corpus Christi. The other two died and I didn’t. We had about the same amount of burns. But I got to lay in the hospital with Vietnam casualties there in the same type of hospital I saw as a kid in Walla Walla.

RV: Wow.

RL: Exactly the same, same type of casualties too.

RV: Was that hard for you?

RL: I didn’t think about it at the time, but I started blocking things out then. I can remember when I could walk; I had to walk to x-ray. They had wards there of casualties and they didn’t move, they were just lumps and then I started blocking that out.

RV: Okay.

RL: I can see it now; I don’t see it. I look and there’s just white.

RV: Right.

RL: And you know, there’s nothing there and that’s not good.

RV: Well, yeah, I guess that tells you there’s something…

RL: Well, what happened is, I came out of the hospital with one slight change, I had claustrophobia in places that I didn’t have before and I was hurt worse than they knew. I hit the ground without a chute; they didn’t find till 1990 that I had a broken neck, fractures all through my back.

RV: Oh my gosh.

RL: And I got out and went right back into the cockpit with that. In Vietnam, I couldn’t turn and look to the left and I was real stiff. What it really took is energy, your body takes energy to fight those things and I wasn’t as strong as I was before.

RV: So you went twenty-three years with a broken neck and back?

RL: Yeah.

RV: Wow.

RL: Well I knew I had fractures in the middle of my back and I knew I had pain in the neck and the neck pain goes down in your arms. I knew I had pain there, but they didn’t find it till 1990.

RV: Wow.
RL: But I went into combat that way and so...let’s see, because I had orders for flight training to Vietnam, I got out of the hospital six weeks later, I was in a replacement – or eight weeks later, I was in a replacement squadron for Vietnam and they put me in a ferry squadron, so I only got forty hours in the States, and a two seat plane and I was heading for Vietnam over the ocean.

RV: That’s incredible, that’s incredible.

RL: I was more afraid flying over the ocean in a single engine plane than I ever was in combat. I had a hell of a lot of stress. I went to Vietnam with PTSD; I know that now.

RV: Yeah, this crash, was it ruled mechanical failure?

RL: Well, what happened is, it was mechanical failure and I was pretty analytical and they took my airplane and I became known to the entire Navy. They shut down the jet pipeline because of my crash.

RV: Really?

RL: Yeah, it was inherent flaw of the F-9; they were all going to do it and it was not something that was going to happen over time, it was all going to happen at once. The part was all made at the same time; it was an actual part in the tail and it all was degrading at the same time. It was all degrading at the same time and another one crashed before they even shut the training down, so I became known throughout the Navy because the plane grounded the jet pipelines for months and when I came back, I came back flying I guess four months later.

RV: So how long were you in the hospital?

RL: A month directly to the hospital, convalescent leave for three months.

RV: Okay.

RL: And I got to feeling okay. There were things that I knew later. When your burns heal, you don’t get the skin back like it was there before. Something that started happening, you can look now is like when I’d get mosquito bites, I used to bleed on my arm. When I used to work in the woods, my legs would start itching, and I itched till I’d bleed, that skin wasn’t as thick and even today, I have a farm, I get scratched easily and things like that. So, you know, I never really recovered from that. The main thing I lost was, maybe that thing that the confidence that it won’t happen to you was gone.
RV: Right.

RL: I mean, I knew it could happen to me because it already had.

RV: Yes.

RL: And I watched people change in combat from the cocky fighter pilot to the pained look in the eyes and the stress line in the face after they got shot down, so it happened to other people besides me.

RV: Right.

RL: And so I went to Vietnam different than I was before that plane crash and the one thing that was different was in the tiny cockpit of the A-4, I used to get claustrophobia at night and in the suit [weather] and I didn’t in other airplanes, so in a lot of planes, I felt terror and I had no idea why.

RV: Right.

RL: If it was on [night] missions, it didn’t justify it.

RV: Right, right.

RL: I was not afraid in combat, but I was afraid in the airplane sometimes for no reason at all.

RV: Yes sir. Sir, why don’t we take a break for a moment?

RL: Okay.
Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I’m continuing my oral history interview with Mr. Robert Lathrop. Today is May 18, 2004. I’m again in Lubbock, Texas, and Mr. Lathrop is again in Sutherlin, Oregon. Sir, let’s pick up where we were yesterday. We had talked about the end of your training; you’re getting ready to be shipped to Vietnam. I had another question about the crash that you described.

Robert Lathrop: Yeah.

RV: That must’ve been very emotionally traumatic to you.

RL: Yeah.

RV: Did it affect you about getting back in the cockpit, doing it again?

RL: Only in the same plane. Once I switched planes it didn’t. What it did affect is I was hurt.

RV: Yes.

RL: And they didn’t find all the injuries and then I’d been burned and that takes something out of you.

RV: Yes.

RL: I mean, I know now that over the years, those injuries have sapped energy and I didn’t know that at that time, so it did take something out of me when I got there. Plus I got claustrophobia in small cockpits which I’d hadn’t had before. But I got my orders to Vietnam in that Naval hospital before I even knew if I was going to live or not.

RV: Wow.

RL: And it shut down the Naval training command. It turned out to be an intrinsic problem of all the airplanes, so my statement shut down the Naval training command.

RV: So your crash perhaps saved other lives.

RL: Saved a lot of other lives probably, yeah.

RV: Yes, yes.

RL: I think there was one more went down even before I stopped it three days later.
RV: Do you still bear any scars from that today, that crash?
RL: Oh yeah, not too much physically. I can see them, but most people can’t.

They turned white over the years.

RV: Okay.

RL: And I’ve always been afraid of fire and even today, you know.

RV: Yes sir. So tell me, when you were released from the hospital, where did you go?

RL: I had three months of convalescent leave.

RV: Yes.

RL: And I just went home and I got to feeling better and I used to run and you know, I went and volunteered at the squadron because that was right before the 1967 war [in Israel]. I really was trained as an intelligence officer by my forestry [education] stuff, and then by taking the intelligence course, so what they had me do was…one thing I did was I just kept up with the intelligence reports coming in from the Mideast and then I did some work for the squadron, about three hours a day.

RV: Okay. And you had your orders for Vietnam, correct?

RL: Yeah. Actually didn’t do that but just a couple of times where I did…there’s a replacement air group, but they usually didn’t send people out right out of flight training to it, they sent other pilots who hadn’t flown the airplane, the A-4, that had a lot of hours, but they sent three of us directly to that replacement air group and we got about forty hours in Yuma, Arizona, and then they put us in the ferry squadron to Vietnam. We picked up a bunch of hours flying across the ocean.

RV: Right. Now explain to the listeners of this what a ferry squadron is.

RL: Well, the Navy has a ferry squadron, VRF-32 and that’s a fixed wing ferry squadron and they assign pilots to it temporary duty to take planes from one place to the other. In this case, we were taking planes from El Toro to Da Nang and you’re just assigned to it as I say for a short time, ferried the planes and then you go back to your regular squadron.

RV: Okay.

RL: And they do have some permanent pilots, but mostly they’re temporary duty pilots and so they transferred seven of us. We had six pilots and a spare to that squadron.
and then we took a series of two seat A-4s over there that were used as air control planes in North Vietnam.

RV: Yeah, right.

RL: I didn’t like that, that was worse than combat, flying over the ocean hour after hour in a single engine airplane and we lost one airplane that had the engine go bad and where was it, it was in Guam, so we only got there with five and we were on the runway when they captured the Pueblo, so we almost got vectored up there.

RV: Wow. Let me ask you, what happened to the pilot who didn’t make it? Did he bail out?

RL: No, the plane, it froze up on the runway.

RV: Oh.

RL: As he landed. It’s usually when the bearings go out. It’s not until you move the throttle, but he had a stable throttle. And then the other five planes went on and we went in Da Nang the second day of the TET Offensive and that was pretty traumatic.

RV: I can imagine. How long did it take to fly over the Pacific in an A-4?

RL: Oh, it takes different ways, about seven hours to Hawaii and about seven hours to Wake, which is just a tiny little spot on the water. And then I think it’s four from Wake to Guam, and I think a little less to the Philippines and then it’s about two and a half hours into Da Nang.

RV: That’s quite a trip.

RL: Yeah, and it’s all [ocean]…there’s nothing out there, no ships.

(Laughter)

RV: Right. Tell me about your first impressions of Da Nang. This was in January or was it in…?

RL: You know, I went in there as a student. It was unbelievable, there were planes taking off each direction and they were running air strikes on tower frequencies. It was the first day of the TET Offensive and there was fighting on the perimeter.

RV: Right.

RL: And we just went in there. We couldn’t even get a word in edgewise and we came in there and we just flew right over the base and out the other side because we couldn’t get word in on the tower, so we just came in and landed and we landed to the
south and then taxied in over to the Marine line, which was on the east side of the base
and then we just turned the planes over. Then we had to get home on our own.

RV: Oh really?

RL: Yeah. We had Class 4 orders, so we were behind everybody else and we
went back to the Philippines on a C-130.

RV: The very day?

RL: Yeah, we got off the plane and forty minutes later, we were back on a plane
headed back to Philippines. And then we had a manifest out of…I can’t remember the
big airbase in the Philippines Air Force and we came back around and landed in…

RV: Is it Clark you’re talking about?

RL: Yeah, Clark, Clark. We came in and landed back in Travis and then we took
a bus in and then back to Yuma.

RV: Wow.

RL: And then I got orders and I was there a couple of weeks and I went back
overseas again.

RV: Okay, and this time you were there to stay?

RL: Yeah, this time I was on a thirteen-month deployment, but it really added a
couple of months to my tour [to ferry the A-4s].

RV: Well yes. Yes. Tell me, do you remember what you saw that day when you
flew into Da Nang? Can you describe the scene?

RL: Well, I mean, they were talking on a radio, they were running air strikes on a
frequency, there were planes taking off and landing and helicopters and smoke on the
south end of the runway where the fighting was. And you didn’t see too much as what
you heard on the radio, you know, but everything was really frenetic. There, were, as I
say, you could not even get your call to land in on the radio and there was just everything
happening at once and that pretty much was true year round. Those bases had planes
taking off and landing twenty-four hours a day and the planes that were launched in
North Vietnam for MiG cap were taking off. They always took off in the north,
regardless of where everybody else was taking off.

RV: Right.
RL: So they’d be zipping by you one direction and accelerating up and you’d be coming in the other and there were all kinds of planes in the pattern. There were Sky Raiders from Vietnam and there were F-106s from the Air Force and Phantoms and A-6s. We were the only A-4s there because the A-4s the Marines had were south, forty something miles at Chu Lai, and so we brought those A-4s in, brand new planes, the others were all beat up looking, you know. But it was pretty…I mean, I’d never seen anything like it.

RV: Right. Well, when you got back to the United States, you had a couple of weeks before your redeploy, is that correct?

RL: Right. Now I flew, I flew a couple of times a day.

RV: Okay.

RL: I didn’t even have a hundred hours when I went back to Vietnam.

RV: Wow, wow. What did your family think about you having to go back or actually packing up for the first time going for your tour? What were their thoughts, do you remember?

RL: Well, since we’ve been dealing with everybody else, it was a known and I took my family up to…most people took their family’s home. You see, in the Marines, we went over as individual replacements. In the Navy, they went over as a squadron on ships so they would go to a base and their wives would stay at that base while the squadron was overseas. That wasn’t true in the Marine Corps.

RV: Right.

RL: We went over as an individual replacement, so most of us took our wives home. My wife was pregnant around six months to seven months and so she went home, we got an apartment and then I had about twenty days till leave and the last day before, my son and I went up to the mountains with a friend of mine and showed my son the places we’ve been. We stayed up and drank champagne and stuff till about three o’clock in the morning, I slept for a couple of hours and then I just went out in the Air Force. You know, and it was pretty hard, you know. I’d already been hurt and climbing on that plane and looking back. Well just as soon as the plane lifted off, I shifted my mind. You just sort of have to shut off what’s here because you had to deal with what’s there and that’s pretty much what people did. You couldn’t live in two worlds at once.
RV: Do you remember the flight over? What was that like?

RL: Well, actually, I was the senior officer on the paw axe a/c. Because I’d gone to Basic School because of the rapid promotions, I was a senior captain and I took over two hundred and forty three individual replacements and I was a commanding officer and I was responsible for them till we got there. And so when we took off, I called ahead to Hawaii and I sealed the base and when the base was...we got there, we had guards then, but we did have six, seven, or nine people try to come buy a ticket back to the United States. Now these were all individual replacements. We weren’t going over as a group and so what we had was we had people going into I Corps and during the TET Offensive, so we knew what we were getting in for because it’s been on T.V. I had seen planes from my squadron on T.V. dropping in Hue and that was a siege of Khe Sanh was on.

RV: Yes.

RL: And so I got in, I actually took them across and we landed in Hawaii and then we went all the way and we went into Kadena, the big Air Force Base on Okinawa and then they disbanded everybody except the Marines were put together on a bus and they were taken to Camp Hanson and locked up. I mean, it was within the base. The only people that could leave the base were staff NCOs and officers. And what they did is they gave us a prep for Vietnam there. We went in there and the first thing they did is something had already been done as they gave us all the shots and made us sick, you know.

RV: Right.

RL: But they did something that nobody else did. They gave us a history of Vietnam and the history of the Buddhist religion and they told us how Buddhists related to each other and a lot of the frustrations of the troops of watching one village being blown up while the others out doing their paddies, what was alleviated because we knew that they had a self-enlightment religion and they...that village was in another world, you know what I mean. They aren’t like us, it’s not a, you know, do unto to others as you’d do unto you, and we started picking that up too because they use their own people as shields, you know, the enemy.

RV: Right.
RL: And so when I went in there and I knew the history of the people, I did have an advantage over a lot of Army and Air Force and other people and junior Marines, that I knew how those people related to each other and I wasn’t as frustrated by the things I saw, where they seem so totally uncaring, as I realized it was their basic religion. There was once an interview, I’ll quote, and it was of a young woman, it’s hard to say, fourteen to twenty-four and they asked her, and I saw this interview.

RV: This is a Vietnamese woman?

RL: This was a Vietnamese woman. She lives south of Chu Lai and this was the interview. They were asked, ‘Where have you been?’ And she said, ‘Everywhere.’ And they say, ‘You’ve been out of Vietnam?’ ‘No.’ ‘Have you been to Saigon, which is about three hundred miles south?’ ‘No.’ ‘Well, have you been to Quang Ngai, which is about five miles south?’ ‘No.’ ‘Have you’ve been to the ocean, which is just over the hill?’ ‘Have you been to that village over there?’ ‘No.’ ‘Where have you been?’ ‘Everywhere.’ And her reason is she has been everywhere within herself.

RV: Right.

RL: They did not relate to that village over there. Their relations were blood relations and that village over there wasn’t the blood relation, it didn’t exist.

RV: Right.

RL: And that drove…it actually drove me nuts too because their interrelationships were odd. I’d gone through flight training with Vietnamese and they were of course of the upper class, but their relationships for me is odd too, you know, not something I was used to. They have a concept called face. Have you ever talked about that with anybody else?

RV: Oh yes, saving face and so forth.

RL: Making face, where everything they do has to have an honor with it and you’d be giving orders to somebody and when they started losing face, they just go blank and when that happened, you might as well just shut up because they weren’t paying any attention to what you say and they weren’t going to do it.

RV: Right.

RL: And so you had to always get them into the situation of making face because if they lose face, they wouldn’t do it.
RV: Right.

RL: And that even...I mean, there were things happen like in Japan, which were their two trains ran together and it was because one of the engineers on the train didn’t want to lose face because he didn’t want to admit he made a mistake. And that was a really hard thing to deal with those groups of people if you’re telling them something and all of a sudden, you’re talking to yourself. They just shut you off, you know.

RV: Right, right. This briefing that you received in Kadena [Camp Hanson]...

RL: Yeah, well, I had gone through both infantry training and flight training with them, and so then we had been briefed on that all the time, how the Orientals think, but when you get into a war, it’s a different thing.

RV: Yes.

RL: Where we would lose respect for them simply because they didn’t care, you know. The North Vietnamese didn’t care if they took a group of villagers and put them [in peril]...on the charge out. You know and the villagers led the troops into combat or they’d set their...that’s why the My Lai massacre occurred, they were set up in that village, you know. And they were set up in villages everywhere, so when we attacked the enemy quite often, we were attacking a village with people in it. Usually by the time the airplanes got there, there wasn’t anything left, but it had been a village. So they were intermixed and then you couldn’t tell who was who. Some things they did we recognized. When we were going to get hit, the bar girls didn’t come into the bar, you know.

RV: Right.

RL: So I never particularly learned to deal with it because of the fact that I couldn’t see how people could be so uncaring about other people. And so what happened is we became numb to it too and it didn’t take very long to where they said, ‘The hell with it.’ I don’t know how many of our troops and soldiers actually respected the Vietnamese as people. I mean, they were so alien to our culture. It wasn’t a country; it was a series of isolated hamlets put together by a border with several different kinds of people in it and landlords controlling most of the land. So it was hard, it was hard to identify with them. I can see what maybe it’s like what’s happening in Iraq, is where the people are so alien too, the people, our soldiers just give up trying to deal with them and
develop their own methods. But that’s what happened there. Most of our troops just got
to where they didn’t respect their people. I mean, I shouldn’t say most, a lot of them did.

RV: Right.

RL: Or they didn’t make any decisions. I mean, I just got to where I said, ‘I’m
not going to make any judgments here and I’m not going to trust anybody either.

RV: Right. Did you make that decision early on or was that something that you
did over time?

RL: Well, I started out by being the intelligence officer, so right away, I could
see what was happening.

RV: Right.

RL: So I knew it before I went there because I talked to other troops, but I didn’t
deal much with the Vietnamese except those who worked on our base at first. And I
could see it though; I could see it. Well we didn’t have enough pilots and so when I went
into Da Nang, and you had to hitchhike everywhere, I guess you know that. You went
into Da Nang; you had to find your own squadron, which mine was at Chu Lai. You
went to airfreight and you put your name on a manifest or whatever plane came in, that’s
when you went to Chu Lai and I went down to Chu Lai in a C-117, must’ve been one
hundred and ten degrees.

RV: This is when you first got in country?

RL: Yeah, I first went into country and…

RV: So you went in and landed at Da Nang?

RL: I landed at Da Nang; I spent one night right next to the runway there in a
transit barracks and from the time you were there, you were beat and wet and dirty, you
know.

RV: Yes.

RL: And you just didn’t sleep and so I flew down in a nice C-117, this is a Navy
version of the DC-3 and landed and by golly, if I didn’t get met by a guy with the name
Chief Warrant Officer Lathrop, same name as me and he was from Texas. And he took
me to my squadron and I checked in and they said, ‘You don’t have enough hours to fight
in combat.’ He said, ‘You’ve never even flown the single seat A-4 So we’re sending you
to Japan.’ So I went to bed planning to get on a plane to go to Japan and Chuck
Porterfield got killed right then and he did something that I never would do. I mean, right then I thought, ‘I’m not going to do what that guy did’, and he was real careful, and what happened is he pushed his throttle forward and he didn’t have the speed at midfield to get air, you know, what the book says you should have to get airborne and he pulled his power back and missed the resting gear and blew up at the end. And I became immediately qualified right then…

RV: That was that night; that happened that night…?

RL: That happened just about the time they told me I was going to go to Japan.

RV: Okay.

RL: But I made the decision then, I said, ‘I never checked my line checks.’ When I push the throttle forward, that’s where it was going to stay. When I got to the end of the runway, that’s when the decisions were made, I wasn’t going to pull my throttle back.

RV: Right.

RL: And you know, we had all these rules to do. I bypassed those and I picked and chose the rules that I flew and one was that I wasn’t going to pull my throttle back if I didn’t have my airspeed at the middle of the field.

RV: Right.

RL: And end up like him and I made a lot of other decisions. I didn’t use the autopilot because I didn’t trust it. And so I tried to simplify combat by knocking out those things, those things that could cause me harm and I started doing that right away.

RV: Now is this in March 1968?

RL: Well, it was March, about March 22nd or 3rd, 1968.

RV: Okay.

RL: And so what they did is they qualified me immediately and they let me fly three flights in a TA-4F in the backseat. I didn’t know where I was for a while. We were…Da Nang would be there on one side and the other and we were upside down and bombing. And so it came up in three days, I got my first flight in a single seat A-4 on a combat mission and it’s a little different plane than a single seat; its smaller cockpit, that the canopy didn’t close automatically, I had to pull it manually closed. I didn’t know
how to turn the air conditioning on, so I about blew my ears out when I did, but my first
mission was in the siege of Khe Sanh. That was a hell of a way to come into Vietnam.

RV: Absolutely. What happened? Tell me what that first mission was like?

RL: Well, I went with a guy named Bob Drumfeller and he briefed me pretty
intensely, something I ended later on and we took off and we flew up the coast and I
didn’t exactly know where I was, but when I got over to Khe Sanh, you could see it was a
big battle. It was sort of shocking to fly up the coast the first time because you could hear
all this radio traffic, people doing this and calling artillery in and Naval gunfire and air
strikes you can see it, going into Khe Sanh looked like…I mean, just solid bomb craters
going across the DMZ and Khe Sanh is this little tiny base, looks like a dash in the page
of a book, you know, and it’s all surrounded by enemy trenches and gun craters, this tiny
little base there and all of a sudden, I was rolling in and something happened and this
might be the fact that I’d already been hurt and keyed up. The first time I come, I had
two napalms and four five-hundred bombs, I was sort of nervous going up, but just as
soon as I came up to roll in, all of a sudden everything went dead calm.

RV: Really?

RL: Just like I was made to be there. It was like the perfect peace and everything
went into slow motion and I rolled the plane inverted and pulled the gun sight down, it
was about three thousand, two thousand feet, there was guns firing all over and I never
ever saw the bullets going by, pulled the gun and I could see all the ground fire on the
ground and everything was slow and I came in and you couldn’t miss and I came in and
when you drop napalm and five hundred pound bombs that are retarded, you drive right
into the ground until you’re so scared, you think you’re going to hit it, you hit [release]
and then you pull. You pull and you try not to hit the ground, you pull out about fifty
feet, so I was right on the deck right at Khe Sanh.

RV: Right, right.

RL: And I pulled up to the left and I was below Khe Sanh and I pulled up and
over Khe Sanh and climbed up over Khe Sanh what little I could to get shielded, but I
had never been there; it was foggy and I pull up and it doesn’t join up on my wing once I
joined up on an F-100.

RV: (Laughter)
RL: And he was headed the same way and so I was talking to one plane and flying on another and then I saw I was on the wrong plane, then I saw my other plane over about, oh, three or four clicks to the left and flew across and flew back and landed and that was your introduction.

RV: Wow.

RL: They assumed by then you knew what you were doing because about an hour later, I was doing the same thing.

RV: Wow.

RL: And that went on straight. Nothing stops, you just flew from day and night, just the duty, you were here and there. When I first got there, we didn’t have air conditioned hooches, we had these Southeast Asia hooch with screens on the side and there were rats running around and there was a huge generator next to you and there were six officers and twelve enlisted men that were living in those filthy things and you couldn’t sleep and we were wrecking planes because people were so tired. But anyway, I was beat in about three or four missions because those things are exhausting.

RV: Would you fly one mission per day?

RL: No, we flew whatever we needed for the day. I flew as low as zero and high as…well; the trouble is the day ends at midnight. You can fly two missions a day and fly four missions in sixteen hours.

RV: Right.

RL: But we flew…after about….I can remember, it was on my fourteenth mission when I taxied out. I said, ‘I got another year of this.’ And so after I landed, I realized that I could not look ahead to what I’d seen already and I did not want to deal with what I’d seen or what I did, and right then, I made a decision. And it was maybe not conscious, but that’s the way I live. When I landed, there was no past; there was no future. The next time I worried about flying combat was when I pushed the throttle forward on the next mission. In between, there was nothing to deal with, you know. I simply lived for the moment and once I landed, there was no tomorrow, there was no nothing. But we flew so much, that I was so tired that I just ached and you climb into one cockpit and climb out of the other and pretty soon, you flew so much and you’re flying sixty missions a month and you’re so tired that it just becomes…you’re sort of like in a,
you know, it’s like a dream, dream world where you’re going all the time. You had to
stand the duty every two days; that was six hours, then you had a collateral duty. My
collateral duty was a bad one. Since I was a trained intelligence officer or I asked to be
the intelligence officer, but when I started getting my intelligence reports and reading
what was going on, I would’ve preferred not to know a lot of that stuff and I couldn’t
talk, I could only communicate to others what they needed to know.

RV: Right.

RL: And I was getting intelligence reports that started at my perimeter and
covered the entire eastern hemisphere, so I wasn’t just finding out what was in Vietnam, I
was finding out what was going on in other places.

RV: Now tell me about…this is collateral duty that you had, how many hours a
day would you spend doing that?

RL: I didn’t have time to spend much time, but all I had to do was read three
intelligence reports a day. I had a clerk to do it.

RV: Okay.

RL: And my clerk did all of it. The biggest [worst] thing you could do is lose a
classified report and see, in a squadron, most of our classified documents had nothing to
do with intelligence. We had all these manuals for gun, all of our ordnance, on our
airplanes, and then they were classified and they would come in and they would replace a
page in a manual, and so what would happen is he would log in the page and he would
insert the page in the manual, okay. Then he would take the other classified page and put
it in a burn pile and then document it out. Okay, and so that was also true of intelligence
reports. They would came in held and once they were no longer germane, he’s put them
in the burn pile, then I checked to see that everything came in went out and then I went
and burned them so that we never had anything on record. Big piles of old intelligence
reports and that was considered a real responsible job.

RV: Right.

RL: If you lost an intelligence report, you were in big trouble.

RV: What was your clearance?

RL: Top secret.

RV: Okay.
RL: We did have some people with secret clearances, but most were top secret.

RV: How did you get this position, this job? Were you asked or did they just assign you?

RL: Well, I ended up quite highly trained with a forestry degree, which is just like intelligence and then six months, well nine months of infantry training, but then I took the intelligence course, forty week intelligence course while I was in the Naval hospital. So I was trained probably better than the division intelligence officer because in the Marine Corps, they don’t have intelligence officers as an MOS. All intelligence officers have a collateral duty. In a Marine Corps however, flying is the collateral duty. My main duty was being an intelligence officer; flying was a collateral duty.

RV: Okay.

RL: And so that took priority. However, I didn’t spend much time on it because I did have a clerk. Basically, we just climbed from one cockpit into the other and when we were off, we went up to the club.

RV: Right.

RL: And what happened is I went out the first day because I was thirsty and got a drink of water out of a water buffalo. That’s the last time I can remember drinking water the whole time I was there. And I drank beer and pop and milk, we had milk at the club. And we had a nice officers club. It had a big, oh, a grass roof and it was like something you’d see in Hawaii, you know. The tile floor, Vietnamese built it and it had a bar and it was right on the ocean and you could sit out there and watch the South China Sea and when I first got there, there wasn’t much place to wash up, so I used to go get out of my plane, you’d smell so bad, I just took a bar of soap, went out and swam in the ocean in my flight suit and underwear and everything, and of course my flight suits became all stiff and everything. But about a month after we got there, two months maybe, they built us Quonset Huts with air conditioners so we can sleep and when that happened and I saw that water, people saw the water coming out of the air conditioner, we took an ammo can and we got fresh water that way. And that’s where we’d wash our clothes is in that fresh water under the ammo can and then our flight suits weren’t so stiff. But we flew so much, that green turned brown and we literally lived in those things. We never wore utilities. We had flight boots, a flight suit, and then we would wear the Marine Corps
cover with our rank on the front until we got into the cockpit. Then our flight gear was
cut away, it was just the straps and all the nylon was out of it except for the G-suit, that
way it didn’t get so hot. And we carried in addition to wearing your torso harness and G-
suit, we carried a survival vest with a pistol and all this stuff in it in case you got shot
down and when you get onto that plane, you could hardly move with all that junk on and
I was so tall, that I couldn’t reach around to touch some of the switches. I would have to
turn things on to the left with my right arm because I couldn’t pull my left arm back.
And as we went along, we started getting planes...when I first got there, we had all pretty
much all Marine Corps A-4 Es, but we started getting planes from the Navy, so we
started getting planes with different kinds of engines and different type of cockpit
configurations and towards the end of my tour, there wasn’t any two planes alike. We
had on and off switches and we didn’t know if they were on or off. We have things in
there that we didn’t know what they were, you know. And most of the stuff [instruments]
didn’t work. If you had a radio TACAN, which you found yourself around and an IFF,
that was considered adequate, you didn’t have to have anything else that worked but the
gun system. And so we flew a lot of missions with nothing working but our basic
[instruments]...really, you just needed a radio. You can fly around without TACAN, be
it hard, because we flew in an area [we knew]...we used to take off by Chu Lai, the
southern part of Vietnam and the missions were just canned. You taxi out, if it was hot
pad or anything and you get on a runway and the first plane would take off and it was so
hot that one plane would take off and you would see them coming down the runway from
the distance and he wouldn’t get off the ground, he’d just rotate and then the gear would
come up and he would still be like six feet above the ground and then as the plane
accelerated, the nose would start coming down and as he got closer to it, he realized he
was about going to run over it and he went by about twelve feet cocked up coming at two
hundred knots and at the south end of the field, they turned and then another plane would
come right behind him and you’d join up at about six hundred feet going the opposite
direction and I was an intelligence officer of the squadron, I’m the only one that knew
why we turned that way in the south and we didn’t turn that way in the north. That’s
because if you didn’t...kept proceeding to the south, you ended up in an area where you
can take a lot of ground fire right in our traffic pattern because our base was under fire.
Not just periodically, well, it was periodic, and not just, you know, in some area, it wasn’t necessary, they killed our GCA crew once; the runway lights were shot out once. I came back with no runway lights. You’d break out of the soup; you had no idea what was going on. And if you heard Chu Lai rockets, they abandoned everything and once I came in and took the resting gear and they abandoned everything, nobody there to pull me out, other planes coming in, so I’d leave my lights on just like a big aiming stake out there.

RV: Right.

RL: And we took ground fire right in the traffic pattern, but it didn’t affect jets much and [it was] pretty much at night. But I can remember coming in there and always wondering what was going to happen because you’d break out of the soup lets say eight hundred feet and all of a sudden these two million candle fire flares would go off because there was fighting at the end of the runway and when those things went off, you were so dazzled, you couldn’t even see your instruments, you know. You had to turn the lightning light or whatever they call it on so you could see your instruments until the dazzling went away and came in and landed, you know.

RV: Can you tell me how when you first arrived there at Chu Lai how the other men in the unit accepted you and how you…?

RL: I didn’t know one single person in the squadron and everybody was an individual replacement. People came and went and they accepted you because you were on their wing. There were people who were not very good pilots who were not accepted and as far as personnel relationships, pretty soon people started coming in that I knew and that’s who you sort of palled around with, but like if you went somewhere or you did something where there was not any big length of time to break down the barriers, like you were immediately like good friends all your life, you might go say up to Japan or something and the guy’s you’re with you’ve never seen before and you dealt with them just like you lived all your life, talked about everything, your marriage problems and anything that…there was an immediate breakdown. So immediately, people just opened up to you.

RV: Right.

RL: And that was not so much true maybe at the SEAL and the operation officers was pretty much true everybody else. I only flew like ten missions and I got sent to
Japan with two majors and right away, we ended up hitchhiking to Japan and we landed from a mission, all of a sudden, we were gone. We just had time to pack a bag and we landed in Tokyo in the airport and here we got off the plane and here we are in utilities with a soft cap carrying a pistol right in the middle of Tokyo International Airport. And then we went out to a training facility for sea survival and when they set you out of country, they didn’t tell you when to come back. They just left, and you came back when you wanted to and finally people started not coming back, so they limited you to two hundred dollars, so however long you can make two hundred dollars last, that’s how long you could stay out of country, but you hitchhiked everywhere.

RV: Okay, so you went to Japan for training?

RL: I went to Japan to be trained in survival over the ocean.

RV: Okay.

RL: I went to Japan to be trained more than once. I also went to Japan to ferry a plane up once and then another time I went to Okinawa to be trained as a battleship and air control spotter.

RV: Okay.

RL: And so I went up there three times. Once I was getting battle fatigue and they sent me out, it was worse flying up there. We flew through typhoons and landed at the wrong base. I think I sent you the book I wrote about some of this stuff.

RV: Yes sir.

RL: But I’ll tell you what amounted to is you were in that airplane so much, it was like your home. And I got to doing things, I got to flying, I got to be able to do things I never could do before. For example, when I was strafing, you come in as you’re strafing, as you’re accelerating, the plane tends to walk up all the time because you’re accelerating and so I started accelerating at a ninety degree angle and then I started strafing inverted because then the plane tended to pull down, you know. So here you are, five hundred feet above the ground inverted, you know, but I learned to do that, then I could hit the target and I can remember once rolling into a mission where I knew I could get out, but I didn’t know why and there was a mountain at the end of it and if you ever saw the bridges of Toko Ri Chavies, how you go down in the bottom of a canyon.

RV: Yes.
Okay, well here the enemy was in the bottom of a canyon and I went right at
the bottom of the canyon. On each side of me was a mountain like four thousand feet
high and what I did was pull my nose up and did like a wingover over the mountain. I
pulled up and I couldn’t keep upright, so I rolled inverted and I went up the ground right
over the ground inverted and down the other side. That’s not something I was trained to
do. Those were things I started doing because I got to feel the plane better. You got to
be a pretty good pilot. If you weren’t, you couldn’t hit the target for one thing and you
got to be known for that. We had some pilots that weren’t too good and we had some
officers that weren’t too good. And then we had this situation as we had regular officers
and we had Reserve officers, okay. And the Reserve officers were the captains and
below and the regular officers tended to be majors and above. I don’t know that we had
any, we may had…yeah, I guess we maybe had a couple of three career officers among
our junior officers; most were not. But most were Reserves who would’ve been second
and first lieutenants except I made captain in twenty-three months and when I was a
captain, I was a senior captain so I spent most of the time in the Marine Corps as a senior
captain.

How was morale?

Pardon?

How was morale?

My Lai?

No, morale amongst the troops?

Oh morale?

Yes sir.

In the squadron, it seemed to me like those guys…I mean, I always really
respected and those guys went out there with their basic crescent wrench and screw driver
and hammer and fixed our planes and I’d say it was real good. In a squadron, they really
respected the pilots and so the morale was good in the air wing, but they were so busy,
they didn’t have time to think, you know. They were out there, but I can remember those
kids out there and when I flew transports to those troops in the Army, they looked like
they were forty years old. I mean, lines in their face, you know and slim and sort of
walking about half tired and they’d climb up there in their dirty old utilities to strap you
in and ask you where you’re going, you know, and you tell them and I used to brief them about once a month about what we did. I’d bring the whole squadron of enlisted men in and I’d take an intelligence map and show where the enemy was and everything, which didn’t set things very good with them because when I did, there was enemy you could see from where I was. You know, the enemy right around our base and we had a big mountain to the west of us and behind the mountain were massive enemy forces and so they ran our flights and shot battleship rounds back there and these were division headquarters and things. So they saw that was there, you know, and they did not realize until I gave those intelligence reports how important the things they worked on in that plane were, like the TACAN, we found all of our targets by our TACAN. That’s Tactical Air Navigation; that gives you a bearing of distance.

RV: Right.

RL: When you went and see all of our flights were controlled from the ground, except North Vietnam. You went in and when you took off, you had a mission, ‘Contact Helix two three on Gold.’ Okay, and that was a coded frequency and then what you do is you take off and join up and after you got airborne, you went under radar control so that you didn’t fly into artillery and other planes, but all the planes went up and down the coast, and there were a lot of planes up and down, and so you flew up the coast, then you went directly inland to your target and then you pick up an air controller and you call them and you’d say, ‘Helix two zero, this is Helborne 533. I have two A-4s with Delta seven, Delta nine for your control,’ and that would give him the coordinate. Okay, and then when he came up he’d say, ‘Helborne 519, I have a mission, are you ready to copy?’ And you’d say, ‘Roger, ready to copy.’

RV: This is the Forward Air Controller?

RL: Yeah, this is the Forward Air Controller or the Ground Controller.

RV: Right.

RL: Sometimes they were ground. And then he’d say, ‘Are you ready to copy?’ You’d say, ‘Roger.’ Then he says, ‘What we have here is an enemy battalion in a fortified village. Run-in heading will be two seven zero left-hand pull. Friendlies will be at two o’clock at two hundred meters. Ground fire, expect heavy. Report…’ I forget how they use the term… ‘Report ready – you’re clear to drop.’ That’s what they’d say,
and sometimes they wouldn’t say clear to drop. They’d say, ‘I will give you clearance
later,’ and you rolled in and you wouldn’t be cleared at all because when that was
happening, you had friendly troops moving out of the area, you know. So, when you
rolled in, usually you said, ‘Dash 1 in hot’ and you’d go in there and you’d call and say,
‘Dash 1 off cold.’ And the dash was like 265-1 and 265-2, would be your call signs and
we just used Dash 1 and 2 within the flight.

RV: Right.

RL: Mainly if you just used the number, you couldn’t a lot of times understand it
and the radios were a weak spot always. Any ground that they heard, that that was one of
the problems we always had was avionics, radios and things, there would be a lot of
reasons we couldn’t complete missions is that they wouldn’t work. I took off one time
and it was at night and I took off and I lost everything. I lost everything but my radio.

RV: Wow.

RL: And I was in the soup and the way I got back is I flew over Da Nang and
they took me from one GCA to the other of Chu Lai, the Ground Control Approach and I
came in with all my ordnance. Another time, I took off and I was at Da Nang at night at
about eight thousand, ten thousand feet dropping radar bombs and all my bombs dropped
off the left wing and nothing on the right. Well, you can manually control them. You
can go out and you pull and blow your racks of bombs off. When I did, I blew my left
rack off, but not my right. So I had three bombs in a rack on the right. Well the plane
would hardly fly.

RV: Right.

RL: Well I got the plane in, but when I was coming in and got down in the
landing configuration, the plane wouldn’t turn left. It was an awkward thing. It was
down by the wing, nose to the left, full left rudder, full left stick, and I made an arrested
landing, and after I landed and had time to look in the book, the plane wasn’t supposed to
fly. And people brought a lot of planes back in pretty bad shape.

RV: How did you get it to land?

RL: I put it in the arresting gear.

RV: Okay.
RL: In flight arrestment and went up on one wing. There was a lot of close calls. I took off one night and blew a tire and went into arresting gear one hundred and fifty knots and it was a real ride. All they do is shove you in another airplane.

RV: (Laughter)

RL: I mean, the Marine Corps was merciless. They expected you...they didn’t expect you to refuse and I can’t remember flying that second mission that night after that happened. I couldn’t even remember; I was so tired.

RV: Wow.

RL: And I was exhausted. I just ate. There were times when I’d lay down and I say, ‘I’m going to try to stay awake,’ and I couldn’t. But I started getting [hyper]...I’d go through periods of being really keyed up. That was the battle fatigue kicking in. And other people did too and we fought it with alcohol. And the troops fought it with drugs, but I got pretty bad for a while. When we were flying three missions a day and I mentioned it. Boy, they sent me out of country for two or three weeks and I did, I got over it.

RV: Right.

RL: And I came right back into combat, but I stayed on the edge of it the rest of the time I was there.

RV: Can you describe what you mean, you fought it with alcohol and the battle fatigue, what was that like?

RL: Battle fatigue is just bad nerves. You start to...I mean, you’re just keyed up. You can’t calm down, you know.

RV: Right.

RL: You can get scared and not be afraid and you just couldn’t release, you were just tense all the time and it can get pretty bad and we had people sent home. I’ll tell you one way it happens is the people get blasted. I got blasted there once and that does it. I’ve seen people go straight from normal to shaking like a leaf catching a full blast.

RV: What do you mean getting blasted?

RL: Well, an explosion hits next to you and I got blasted once when I went up to a plane that had crashed to try to get the pilot out and the thing blew up.

RV: Right.
RL: It hit me, it didn’t feel like noise or anything, it felt like I got hit by a wall of air and I shook for three days, you know. But I saw people…well World War I where they had shell shock, in movies

RV: Yes.

RL: I’ve seen the movies of that where they’re shaking and everything.

RV: Yes.

RL: That’s what blasting will do to you. Shell shock, combat fatigue, combat neurosis and PTSD are all the same thing and PTSD isn’t delayed, it just gets worse over time and that’s why people used drugs in Vietnam, to calm down. You see, in World War II, they found out, you know, it lasts about, oh…[after] about three or four months in combat and you weren’t worth a damn anymore and they kept us at combat in the Marine Corps the whole thirteen months we were there. And so we had a lot of…I mean, you know, on the average, we had people kill themselves so they didn’t have to go back into combat, you know, and they just refuse, you know, outright refuse, you know. And we had a mutiny. Our pilots [who flew]…we had a helicopter called the H-46 that’s still flying. We had pilots refuse to fly them because they started splitting in two. So, you know, we were pushing things to the limit. There’s one thing you could see, anytime you flew around the Army, they had many more helicopters or much more artillery to support their troops than we did. The Marines had to do things with people that they did with artillery and tanks and things like that. We didn’t have the support because a lot of our support comes from the ocean on ships and the Army had a lot more supporting units. They had so many helicopters, they almost flew into each other, there were so many of them. We didn’t have that many and we had the worst part of the area [Vietnam]. We weren’t there alone, the Army and the ARVN’s were there, but I Corps, when I was there was just one big battle.

RV: Right. Can you describe what a typical day was like for you from the time you got up until the time you tried to go back to bed?

RL: Well, we followed four things [patterns]. For four days, we’d be on the hot pad, four eight days, we’d fly scheduled missions and for four days, we’d fly night, so they were different. But on the hot pad missions, you stood duty for six hours on and six hours off and what you did is you took…those were the missions where they needed
people in emergencies and we had planes loaded with different things. What you do is you wait in the ready room, you get a hot pad launch, you can go out and you go out and you get in the cockpit and you check in and you say, ‘532-1, are you up?’ And they say, ‘Up.’ And then you call, ‘Chu Lai tower, this is Helborne 536, taxi takeoff, active scramble.’ And they say, ‘You’re cleared for taxi takeoff,’ but you take out and taxi fast and you get to the runway, you wouldn’t stop, you roll into position and hit the power. When you hit the power, and you had to do all your checks, and then number one plane would get a thumb’s up from one or two and he’d be off and when he lifted off, number two is off and you’re off to the target that takes about five minutes to get out there and then you’re full speed to the target and you do whatever you’re told. Okay, now the next type of mission were the scheduled missions and those tended to be a lot of times where we flew a lot of planes to an individual battle. So, you would get up in the morning or whenever you got up and you’d go to a brief. Now we were about two miles from our flight line, then we’d have to catch a ride, hitchhike with the Army or something down to the place and then you check a plane out. You flew a different plane every time and you taxi out, then you’d go fly your mission and you would be set, it was can for takeoff. Touchdown, you go in and you hit the target and then you come back and you go home and land and you usually had two scheduled missions a day and we flew early so people from four in the morning until like two in the afternoon. And then from two in the afternoon to nine or ten at night and then when you had night missions, those were radar missions where you flew alone at night and I hated them the worst because of the weather. You taxi out there and it’d be three hundred foot overcast and raining and you push the throttle forward, pull into the soup and the planes were beat up, and then you fly alone and a lot of times to North Vietnam and you’re up there totally by yourself, tired, two o’clock in the morning.

RV: Right.

RL: You usually flew two a night and the weather was abominable. The summer monsoon, the thunderstorms would be sitting right off the coast, so you had a penetrated thunderstorm while going out, then going into the target, then coming back home and a lot of times the base was socked in and you’d have to shoot a GCA and back you go, you land on a wet runway and I think all of our night runways were arrested. All of our wet
runway, crosswind and night landings were rested landings as I recall. Remember, we
were Navy Aviators, so we made a lot of arrested landings.

RV: Right.

RL: Dozens of them. Anytime you had a problem, you know, and then I didn’t
like those. Then you had the night hot pad missions and that’s when you went out at
night when there were troops in contact. They were always hairy, you were down in the
mountains at night and you couldn’t see anything, you were dropping against a black
ground and a strobe light. You had your high drag ordnance and that’s the stuff that’s
delivered at five hundred feet and you pull out a fifty and those were always high drag
ordnance stuff, so right down in the mountains at night.

RV: Wow.

RL: And they were bad, but you didn’t get many of them either.

RV: Right. Tell me about the enemy fire and what you faced.

RL: Well, it varied from nothing to so many guns you couldn’t see them on the
horizon. Roy Schmidt was one of my classmates and got shot down. They surrounded
him; there were so many guns, he couldn’t see the end of them and the same way was
true at Khe Sanh and they didn’t always shoot at you in North Vietnam, but when they
decided to shoot at you in North Vietnam, it looked like lights of a major city and there
were big flashes. So you could see those flashes from dusk till bright day from the
ground and even sometimes in the day, but when they were…I used to wonder how many
hundreds or thousands of people were down there, you know. But when I rolled in to try
to knock down the ground fire for Roy Schmidt, I mean, I couldn’t have knocked it down
with a nuclear weapon. Same way at Khe Sanh and North Vietnam, the same thing. But
it wasn’t always there. Quite often we’d be attacking where there would be an enemy
unit, but we wouldn’t see the fire. The fire was reported by the controller a lot of times
and about three quarters of our missions we got fired at. And usually it was small arms,
but I can remember one night mission where I could see the Quad-50s shooting at us.
There must’ve been a couple of thousand guns shooting at us and I could actually see the
Quad-50s tracking me, you know. It was only like six hundred feet. And you could see
that, you can see the flashes. What you couldn’t see was the tracers going by. For
example, I took a guy out once in a two-seat plane and he made a movie. And I was
amazed, there were all these tracers around the airplane and I never saw them on one mission. I just cut them out, I guess. We flew to exhaustion and since I was an intelligence officer, I started computing things. I knew when a plane took off, what the probability was of that plane would still be around at the end of the year. I knew when a pilot took off in our squadron, what his probability was of getting shot down and what his probability was of getting shot down and captured or killed and it was one and five, your chances of getting shot down and one and five of shot down killed. So your chances of getting shot down is twenty percent and then I went to the next squadron where your chances of getting shot down were about eighty percent. So, I could keep track of that because I always had the number of missions flown per day, the number of planes shot down, where they were shot down. I had all this stuff and I also had things I didn’t want to know, like what was happening to our prisoners on the ground. I don’t remember any pilot ever getting shot down in South Vietnam. Now when the enemy got to them, if they were ever captured, they killed them and we’d get the bodies back. And then that’s something else; I don’t remember too many prisoners being taken by the enemy of us or us of the enemy because I would talk to our ground troops.

RV: Right.

RL: One reason was is Vietnam was a war of small units. It wasn’t the war of…like when we fought in Europe, we fought what was squadrons and divisions and airplanes, the way we were fighting in Europe, we were not fighting with companies and platoons, we were fighting with armies and corps, you know, and multiple armies. Like we hit Normandy with not only…I think we hit with like two corps.

RV: Yes.

RL: Two corps, you know. A lot of the [combat] stuff in Vietnam was being done by patrols with five and six people.

RV: Did you see that as a problem?

RL: Well, it wasn’t that type of war and so there was no way for them to bring prisoners back and I don’t know that the enemy took many prisoners. Some of those things didn’t show up realistic because we didn’t know. There were a lot of questions and there were also things there that I didn’t understand then that I understand now.

RV: Right.
RL: And there were things there that had nothing to do with Vietnam that I shouldn’t have known. For example, there were two other wars going on while we were there and it never made the news and I imagine that’s happening now. There was one between Russia and China, a border war and another between Pakistan and India.

RV: Right.

RL: And so I knew about a lot of stuff that had nothing to do with Vietnam.

RV: Did that make your job in Vietnam more difficult or more easier?

RL: I would just assume after a while, you know, I was pretty much numb to anything. I could read anything or hear anything and I had no emotion and that’s something that happens I think to everybody.

RV: Right.

RL: I think you become overwhelmed and you just have to accept something and deal with it later.

RV: Right.

RL: So you can see the worst thing you got [ever experienced], you got to put it out of your mind and go fly another mission.

RV: How did you deal with death?

RL: I didn’t deal with it.

RV: I mean, the idea of you being shot down or your fellow pilots being shot down, or knowing what you were doing on the ground?

RL: I didn’t think about it.

RV: Okay.

RL: Well, I had to think about it when it happened, but I’ll tell you how they did it. We had planes take off and get shot down; we didn’t get the opportunity to deal with it unless we were wingmen or the duty officer because what would happen is that the plane wouldn’t come back. Okay, it would still be listed on the board, then there’d be a telephone call.

RV: Right.

RL: The duty officer would get up and erase the name and they’d go in and remove the guy’s personal possessions and go through them and that’s all we did and that’s the way it was dealt with. You couldn’t deal with it, you simply didn’t deal with it.
and you shut that off and dealt with it later, which is one reason people started getting screwed up years later when this stuff starts coming out. Because what happens is, is you bury this and you become numb. Well, when you come back to society, you’re still numb. You can’t hold all that it. I see it in my [family]…I have an uncle from World War II, he never talked about the war, but as he got older and didn’t have the strength, that’s all he talked about. And it takes energy to hold that in.

RV: Yes.

RL: And you have the conditioned responses of combat. Battle fatigue and PTSD cause a change in personality. Your adrenaline goes sky high and so your tendency is to run away or if you’re the type of person that charges and attacks, you’ll destroy the enemy. If you run away, you’re probably going to become a casualty. Then it comes back to normal. In Vietnam, you didn’t have time to come back to normal. It went up and it’d come a little down to normal, you’d be back up pretty soon. You’re up all the time and you’re highly alert and the fight or flight syndrome reverses. You don’t get afraid anymore, you get mad and if you stay that way long enough, it’s irreversible. You get mad and you stay mad and you stay aggressive, so when you come back to society, you don’t get afraid anymore, when somebody confronts you, you’re going to turn on them and attack them. Okay, it depended on your value system. A lot of people came back and fought that with drugs. A lot of people ended up in the pen and a lot of people ended up like myself holding it in and ended up with PTSD.

RV: Right.

RL: Because ultimately, as you get older, you don’t have the energy to hold it and it starts coming out anyway. And that’s how a lot of people would start having…I started by having nightmares. Okay, and I started by having a job where I could go all the time. I was always happy leaving, but when I got someplace to work in forestry, I felt uneasy. I always wanted to go to someplace because you’re always trying to run to someplace that stress isn’t. So for a long time after the war, you saw people that’d hitchhike or something on the road, you ask where they come from, where you going there. Well, they’re running from themselves and I did the same thing in my job. I would go…I’d just feel great leaving town, going out to work in it, but two or three days working someplace, that the stress would still be with me, and so I just started running
and becoming a workaholic. But what was happening is, it was getting worse all the
time. I went into my first period of depression about a year after…not even a year, six
months after I was released from active duty and I went to Vietnam right then, so it was
about close to a year and three quarters when I got back. And so about three or four
months after I got out, I went into depression and didn’t even know what it was. It lasted
a couple of days and then went away, but it got to be longer and longer and longer.

RV: Right.

RL: Until about 1980, it lasted a month a couple of times a year. And what
happened was in 1980 [1984]; I was married and had another family, remarried. I got
divorced after I got back and I woke up one night and I was just in Vietnam and I had
massive nervous breakdown. I mean, for three years, I don’t even know how I stayed
alive, but finally I went into a treatment center and I was on medication at work and what
they do is they blast the war out of you. They just keep bringing this stress level up so
you’re back there and that worked for me. I just literally exploded because I blocked out
the war when I found out about My Lai and it came back fifteen years later in that
treatment center and that’s when the anger [hit] for me and I went into like a rage. Then
you’ve got to go into after treatment. It took years to calm down and I started writing. In
fact, I didn’t start writing and throwing papers away, like I started writing to the people
[who wrote about] at My Lai and asked what was going on and that’s how I started
writing and doing like investigative reporting on things I knew about.

RV: Right. Now tell me, can you get into what you did with My Lai and why
you went that direction?

RL: Well, because I was angry and so I started asking what happened and then
when they’d tell me to shut up, I got mad and I started telling them to shut up.

RV: When was this?

RL: And that’s just what happened, you know. I’d go into a rage when I read
about, first off, I blocked…I didn’t know where My Lai was until I was out of the Marine
Corps, and then I blocked it out and so I didn’t deal with it until I was forty-five years old
and had horrible flashbacks because I had not only had it documented, I have a
photographic memory, I can run that just like a movie.

RV: Right.
RL: And after I got angry, every time I did, I’d get so mad, I’d literally see red, what the press would write about it, especially after…certainly I’m not the only one who that told them what happened, but I might be the only one that has it documented and I took out My Lai IV as the intelligence officer and I saw both destroyed as the intelligence officer and I was educated and this was twenty years later and there wasn’t anyone to tell me to shut up. And so I just started…I never wrote about My Lai on my own. I always responded to somebody else writing about it. At first, trying to find out what happened, then trying to get my documents back, then telling them to shut up and when they wouldn’t…I considered My Lai a legal action in which all the evidence wasn’t yet in the way most Vietnam veterans and so I contacted local attorneys to get them and I wouldn’t do that again. They looked at me like I was some pariah.

RV: Now when was this, is this in the 1980s?

RL: This was about 1992, about four or five years because I had written periodically.

RV: Okay.

RL: Finally, I contacted F. Lee Bailey and he referred me to Calley’s attorney and from 1992 on, when the press told me to shut up, I went and contacted Calley’s legal firm and they told me what to do.

RV: Now what documents did you have and what were you trying to accomplish?

RL: Well, what I was trying to accomplish is to get the guilt off the people [the soldiers]. The first people…the guilt of them having them be war criminals is apparently something people can’t handle in this country because they put thousands of people in the psychiatric wards that were involved in My Lai just for the knowledge and there were four I think in the one I went to, two of them killed themselves.

RV: Simply because they knew about My Lai, they were put in…?

RL: They just knew about…well, they were involved. One was a corpsman who treated some of the survivors. The other was an Americal Division officer that happened to be, you know, part of the planning and cover up and everything. So you had thousands of people involved in the hospitals, in the planning and helicopters and everything, and they all felt responsible, you know. And so all over the United States, you had people
with the guilt, this guilt, and when you saw the presentations of the press, these guys
were suicidal that they talked to, you know. These were the ones that I think became
public with Calley, but most of what happened didn’t become public and I don’t even
know what all happened, except that the two villages Calley was supposed to have
destroyed actually weren’t, so they went back a second time and since I have flight log
book and diary, it was the 8th and 9th of October ’68. And the second time, there wasn’t
anything left, just a blazing hole in the ground and I saw the intelligence reports.
Casualties were about fifty percent bigger in the smaller the village and My Lai IV must
have had to have twelve, fifteen hundred people in it.

RV: Okay, so you’re saying the incident in March didn’t happen…

RL: It was small compared to the incident in November because we used aircraft,
and napalmed the five hundred pound bombs.

RV: The same village, the same My Lai village?

RL: The villages were completely rebuilt, that they were completely rebuilt and
populated. The paddies that just been planted, the intelligence reports gave the casualties,
which were more than when Calley was there and My Lai IV was a great big village, it
wasn’t small.

RV: Right.

RL: And because I never attacked intact [undamaged] villages, my wingman and
I had never seen anything like this, so we took a good look at it and my first run, I got
aborted and so I rolled inverted about six hundred feet and looked down into the streets.
It was a great big village with little huts and you can see the grey things [walls], but you
couldn’t see any people. It was a preplanned antipersonnel attack; that was the nature of
the ordnance, but in the shadows of the evening, you couldn’t really see people and there
was something wrong with the mission. I mean nothing matched in it. Like, we were
told we were attacking an enemy battalion with no ground fire, and then they aborted us
on the first mission [run]. You don’t ever do that when there’s friendly…you only do
that when there’s friendly forces in the area and the friendly forces were mostly [at 1500
meters]…but anyway, I remembered the mission because it was just outside our landing
pattern. And I never saw an intact village, but we took it out. It was first napalmed and
the flames, they were so high that my last run I actually flew through them, they were
lapping around the cockpit. Then they totally covered [the village] with the delayed fuse
bombs, which penetrate bunkers underneath and blast the bunkers apart, carrying the fire
down.

RV: I’m sorry, what was the purpose of this mission?
RL: The purpose of the mission I presume is to take the witnesses off the map. I
just talked to a guy, the first person I ever know that knew about it. He said they were
watching it from the Americal Division [Headquarters] because they could see it from
our base. So, it was a cover up.

RV: Okay.
RL: It was the final decision.
RV: So it was an effort to get the people who could prosecute Calley and…
RL: To get the witnesses gone apparently, and I’m not too sure it is as it appears
as I say it, as a preplanned antipersonnel attack.

RV: Right.
RL: And I saw both villages destroyed because of the massive fire, but there was
something wrong with the mission, too. Why, when we showed up so slowly, didn’t
everybody run out? But the way the attack was, it was an attack on people in
underground bunkers, and we wouldn’t have seen them.

RV: Right.
RL: But it was a preplanned antipersonnel attack and the reason that it was
preplanned is that it was atypical ordnance. You had surface ordnance in the first
mission, then subsurface ordnance on the second; you’d do that. And it wasn’t done by
anybody in the Army, it was two Marines [A4Es], two Air Force Phantoms, and an Air
Controller from the Air Force, so there was no Army involved and years later when
General Powell was running for president, I heard people calling in from the Americal
Division saying he was the operations officer that orchestrated it.

RV: Was he?
RL: Huh?
RV: Was he?
RL: Apparently. However, however…
RV: Okay.
RL: The first time they attacked the village, it was an entirely different chain of command than the second time.

RV: Right.

RL: They didn’t tell anybody the second time what they were doing and Colin Powell was a major. Colin Powell was manipulated just like us. There was nothing he could do. No major in that division, a black major would ever be [trusted]…my guess is that most of the people were lied to and manipulated to the point where they had no real idea what happened and that the fact that I found out was because first, I was an intelligence officer and second, it was already history by the time I knew, so I was able to get maps and area photos and things like that. And then I was able to talk to people in PTSD groups who were involved with me and there were a lot more people involved the second time than the first.

RV: Now, did you fly one of the missions in the second time?

RL: I led the air strike on My Lai IV.

RV: On the second time around in the fall?

RV: Yeah, in the fall.

RV: Okay.

RL: I wasn’t there in March 16th.

RV: Right, right. Okay.

RL: No, I led the air strike and I was the duty officer, so I also knew where it came from.

RV: Right.

RL: And so what happened is when we attacked My Lai IV, we didn’t have any pilots, we were on stand down, so the two duty officers took it.

RV: Right.

RL: And the duty officers, we were in contact with the people who sent us and it came from the Air Operations section of the Division G-3, the same one Calley did. I did a complete analysis and everything that happened the first time happened the second, except there was a different chain of command. So when everything happens twice the same way, you got the same person orchestrating, so you have too small chain of
command up and where it meets, that’s who’s responsible and the Army got them. The
press didn’t cover it, but the Army got them.
RV: Who was that individual?
RL: General Koster and his assistant were kicked out of the Army in disgrace
after being demoted, but that press never covered that. They always covered what
happened when Calley was there.
RV: Right.
RL: But the actual two people that got it got kicked out and reduced in rank and
kicked out of the Army. Well, forced into retirement, but everybody who knows
anything about the military, they lived the rest of their life in disgrace.
RV: Now, tell me those names again.
RL: General Koster, who was the commanding general when Calley was there.
RV: And how do you spell that last name?
RL: K-O-S-T-E-R. His assistant, they were both reduced in rank. He was the
head of the Naval Academy or Military Academy, I think. And they got kicked out for
their cover-ups and probably no one person knows the full extent of the cover-ups but I
used to see them in the intelligence reports. The Americal Division intelligence reports
did not follow patterns that other people did. For example, we would fly to an Americal
Division mission.
RV: Right.
RL: Okay, and we would report to the division or the air wing, which would
report to the division. Okay, then Americal would report and we’d get this report too.
Well I got the intelligence reports from both the Americal and from the division, and I
didn’t understand why, for example, the Marine report reported one thing and the
Americal didn’t report it at all. But I recognized now that the reason My Lai occurred
and the reason other screw ups occurred that I now know about is, it’s what General
Schwarzkopf said over and over and over when referred to that command. He said,
‘They were political.’ That is one of the most significant things ever said. They got into
their jobs by who they knew, manipulating the system and not what they do. When they
got into a position of command where they had to make a decision, they didn’t know
what to do, so they screwed up and then covered up. That was their whole career and that
happened…My Lai is one that came public, but I think it was happening all the time. I know another situation that I talked about with people who were involved where I told you about all those massive forces behind the mountain.

RV: Yes.

RL: Americal Division set a helo lift in there on top of them, they got blown away. They had to bring in the 82nd Airborne to get them out of there. Well nobody that knew anything and the intelligence reports would have done that. We hit with interdicting fire for harassment from the battleship and cruisers and with arclights and we never saw any troops in there. And what that was, it was a rebuilding area for shot out troops. I know a lot of…see, when I dealt with My Lai, it was already history. So I could get things most people couldn’t. I could talk to people who were involved with me and I can read books and I was able to check out the court-martial file and I got maps, I got tactical maps to go with my…see, I have the coordinates in my flight log book.

RV: Right.

RL: Bravo 5 715 789 [map coordinates], and I also got the date and time within fifteen minutes and I was the intelligence officer, I know the casualties, I talked to other people and at first, I thought, you know, here, I have unique knowledge. It’s just the opposite. I think thousands of people saw it and based on what I heard on Talk Radio, each time General Powell’s name came up, there must’ve been ten thousand people who knew that happened because you could see it from the big base at Chu Lai, you could see it from all the mountains around there and by then, a lot of Army troops knew about it. I’m not so sure that most people involved didn’t know it was happening then and figured it out later. Nobody that I knew in our chain of command knew about it because we’d thought something about it. One thing we did do that indicated that we might know about it to them is we refused a Distinguish Flying Cross from the mission. We were offered a Distinguish Flying Cross, just like a helicopter pilot was.

RV: You were offered the DFC for that mission?

RL: Yeah, but the Marine Corps had a dual authentication. Not only did the person that wrote the DFC have to authenticate it, the pilots in a Marine Corps had to authenticate if it was justified. So that was something different. We couldn’t be awarded
the DFC until we authenticated it and the Marine Corps set that up so this sort of thing wouldn’t happen.

RV: Right.

RL: And so we refused to authenticate it because the mission didn’t justify it. So we sent it back. As far as I know, everybody that knew about that mission was on it in the Marine Corps and the Air Force was dead within a year [by 1970].

RV: Why weren’t you killed?

RL: Well, I kept a diary.

RV: Okay.

RL: Every plane from the 28th of October ’68 till the 15th of February ’69, every single plane I was scheduled to be flying on ended up with fuel problems. Two of them I didn’t take, one disappeared, the other crashed. The rest of the time, I made emergency landings.

RV: Really?

RL: Yeah. However, there is another…I mean, that doesn’t make any sense. Planes don’t have fuel problems, but it happened and they were all fueled at different places. I can’t prove anything except the probability of everybody dying suddenly and unexpectedly alone in accidents, is it right, except there might be a secondary cause. The stress of being involved is so great; I think it could kill people at the time.

RV: Right.

RL: The people I knew that all died, died in ways that I would expect under extreme stress; drunk and [car] wreck, a heart attack. The two that disappeared don’t compute. It was the only two people I ever know that disappeared in broad daylight were the two involved in that.

RV: How many people…?

RL: Pardon.

RV: How many people total were involved that you know of?

RL: I’m talking about only the people I know.

RV: Okay.

RL: I know, and that might not be significant because you can have more than one cause. The stress of being involved in something like this…as I say, I blocked my
memory. I’d been in a war, everything from the time I found out I was in My Lai and the reaction around me it snapped. It took fifteen years, and even when my memory started to come back to ten years to even realize it was real in a way.

RV: Right.

RL: I mean, I can’t describe to you what it’s like to be the real person responsible for the My Lai massacre because Calley didn’t do much, but we did. So when you’re talking about the My Lai massacre, most of the people were killed by us and it had to be that way and the only way it could not be is if somebody else killed them and we covered them up, covered it up.

RV: Right.

RL: But I’ve never run into anybody that said that. I have run into other people, and I also sought an appraisal for my historical file and I ran into the same exact statement from other people and they didn’t say that it was populated and they did kill them, and one was a Marine. There was another Marine, made a statement and I was calling, getting appraisals and the appraiser had appraised his documents saying exactly the same thing I said. And he was on a patrol up on the hill. Well, that’s the hill we bombed. After we hit My Lai IV, we had surface ordnance; we attacked the hill with both utilities. Well, we had the hills, not the enemy and I think they were just dumping our ordnance.

RV: But dumping it on friendlies?

RL: I don’t know. I think the controller was just dumping our ordnance somewhere because we had surface ordnance and when they brought the two Phantoms in, they used delayed fused ordnance, which penetrated the bunkers.

RV: Right.

RL: And all we’d done is blown fire all over ourselves.

RV: Do you think that they offered you the DFC so you’d keep quiet?

RL: I just know it’s a pattern, they offered the DFC to the helicopter pilot[in the first attack] to make him quiet. Everything that happened the first time happened the second time.

RV: Right.

RL: Okay, and it just fit the pattern.
RV: Has anybody in the last...well, what kind of contact have you had with people about this in the last few years?

RL: I was offered a million dollars for an interview. Connie Chung tried to interview me; it was blocked.

RV: Who blocked it?

RL: I don’t know. I’ll tell you that things have happened that tell me that they don’t receive...when I contacted Calley’s attorney, here’s the ethics of the press 1970 court-martial]. You cannot sue the press for what they won’t write. Even if what they do write is no longer true, so they can start writing a story, get more evidence, and they don’t have to write it. The second one is no one who was released from active duty or discharge was reachable by the Army for the court-martial and that’s because the Army doesn’t have the right of the International Tribunal in...where is it, Europe somewhere.

RV: In The Hague.

RL: The Hague to call people back or out of the Army, the Army can’t do that.

Third one is the most important. After World War II, not everyone tried as a war criminal was tried at the Nuremburg trials. That some were tried by the United States Army and they were given the right of appeal before the Supreme Court and one general did so, setting the precedent for Calley to do so. And so I was asked to contact him and tell him about the [attack]...and I sent a letter to him and I always sent more than one letter to document it and I have a file. He didn’t reply, but I’m not sure my letter has ever got through to him because the one thing is, is if you brought the My Lai thing up, you bring a whole lot more up.

RV: Yes sir.

RL: Than what happened at My Lai because when I did my research, the first thing I looked at was not what Hersh wrote or books; I looked at the Federal Register. I looked at what Congress said and what Congress said was that there were five villages. That was right in the Federal Register and so really what I think is if they would’ve expanded the area of search, they’d found more villages until they’d have been all over Vietnam and would’ve found hundreds of them and the reason is the enemy used their own people as shields.

RV: Right.
RL: And so having to attack a village. I mean, I see guys break down and cry and I saw a guy that saying he’s in a tank and their shooting flachette, which is like shotgun, and here come all the villagers out, women and children and behind them the enemy and he’s got to level the villagers first. Well, that was alien to our thinking, but that’s what the enemy did and they set up in their own villages and we attacked them. And so they used their own people as shields and it even happened to me. It wasn’t in a sense, but I only took one prisoner ever. I was a company commander for three months and I was at Da Nang and what happened is during the TET Offensive, we were hit in the south by a sapper company, which they were companies of like fifteen people with a company commander. And anyway, they came in and they hit right in front of a reinforced rifle company and they blew up them. They blew fifteen people. They tripped the flare and they blew fifteen people just to pieces. Well, it turns out, these fifteen people were young women about fifteen, sixteen years old. Our troops just sort of went nuts, but we captured…we captured the platoon commander alive and he snapped and then he was babbling. Well, that tells me that when you got women in combat, it isn’t just us that were affected; their own men from their village went nuts too. That’s something about women in combat. I’ve led a company; there were three things that you could not have, that you simply could not have in your unit that broke up unity of command. I’m talking about a real tough unit. We didn’t have a real tough defense area, but I had a real tough unit. There were three things that always broke it up. One was a thief in the barracks; another was a homosexual; no homosexual, an active homosexual, the other was a woman. And those three things broke up unity of purpose and there were other things, but those things did it every single time and you didn’t have to have the whole company react. You only had to have three or four people and it started breaking things down. And so when I was company commander, I learned a lot about human relationships of dealing with men because I had no other officers. I took over three days before the ’69 TET Offensive, and so I had to do a whole lot by myself and I learned a lot. As I say, I was a trained infantry officer, I learned a whole lot of human relationships there and the one thing that I learned is that when you’re in combat, it isn’t rank that controls it and its training to a degree, but the one thing you got to have is unity of purpose. You have to have everybody working together and if you have anything that
breaks that apart, you lose unity of purpose; you lose the effectiveness of your unit and
you lose the effectiveness of yourself as a commander for allowing it to happen. And so I
maintained unity of purpose by basically...these men were experienced; I didn’t have to
tell them, I had to prepare a lifestyle and a situation for them where they were armed, fed
well, got their supplies, everything was done and they would act themselves. All I had to
do was to give them what they needed, and I had good sergeants. I had to use sergeants
rather than a platoon commander for platoon commanders because I had no other
lieutenants. The only lieutenant I had, had to be cashiered and court-martialed, so I
ended up alone. But these sergeants were all combat vets, and so our unit was real good.
During the TET Offensive, we didn’t have any trouble at all. Everything that happened,
they did the right thing and the one thing that I had real trouble with was blacks against
blacks. I had black Marines who were sergeants and corporals who were making the
Marine Corps a career, and here I had black Marines who were enlisted or whatever.
Those two pitted each other; they pitted against each other. They called the guys who
were really trying Uncle Toms and Oreos and they’d come talk to me, you know, ‘What
am I supposed to do?’ And I sort of, you know, I can understand that and I said, ‘Well,
you got to live your life, they’re trying to drag you down.’ And I said, ‘You don’t want
to be drug down to them [their level], and that’s what they’re trying to do.’ And I only
ever had one sergeant and our method of dealing with problems was to transfer them to
combat unit because we were a combat unit too, but we were a defensive combat unit.
That seemed to work. But I had to handle personnel problems with the blacks and right
then, I could see...I couldn’t even comprehend the problem much less solve them.

RV: Right.

RL: Their family relationships broke down, people disappeared, the wives were
married to two people. One guy was getting pornographic movies from families [his
wife], there was deaths and stuff, and I couldn’t send anybody home. You know, but my
worst Marines in that company weren’t black. My worst Marines were white and I don’t
know where they came from, but they were just here and there. My best Marines were
my black sergeants, but as I say, they were in lieutenant’s positions. I had them all in key
positions and I had internal security and that was bad news. We had a lot of people go
nuts and then we had people deserting. See, that was the transient facility. Okay, we had people coming through there and going out.

RV: Was this at Da Nang?

RL: Da Nang, right. And so I started accumulating things that people left in country because they were going out in emergency leave and things and so I started getting weapons and then there would be shipments come in for the Army and no Army to take them, so I ended up with a bomb dump and I started accumulating all this stuff [equipment] from people. I don’t even know, people had nobody to pick it up, so I had a bomb dump full of jeeps. I had a tank; I had a big Army tank and a lot of weapons. I mean, my unit had M-14s, not M-16s but I had enough M-16s to equip them. Those were all Army weapons and a lot of them were lost. And then I had to deal with the legal system. I had to do a lot of investigations. I had to do investigations under violations of international law. That was when pilots were killed on the ground, you know, by the enemy or we had one violation of international law in our own squadron where a pilot was shot down in North Vietnam carrying a doctor on an airplane. And basically when I was a company commander, I wasn’t fighting, I was trying to keep people equipped and deal with the legal system. And when I left Vietnam, I don’t know how many pieces of evidence I had to lock up because you have to…see, when you’re a lieutenant or captain, you’re a lawyer in the military and so I was doing investigations [and holding chains of evidence], sitting on courts-martial, acting as a defense council and investigations, a lot of times there would be evidence, pistols and rifles and jeeps and things that had to be maintained as chain of evidence so that it could be used in a court-martial and since I had a bomb dump and since I had an armory, I was signed for all this stuff. And that was, you know, something that was constantly going on. That followed me back to the United States and followed me into the Reserves. Follow-ups on those investigations followed me till the day I resigned from Reserves.

RV: What day did you come back from Vietnam?

RL: I came back at the end of April in 1969.

RV: Okay, and you stayed in active until when?

RL: I got out in August in 1970 and I went overseas again. I got transferred to the second ANGLICO, which is an Air Naval Gunfire Company attached to an artillery
battalion that goes with allies, and I was first an air controller and commanding officer. We were the fleet and I went with the Atlantic fleet down to Vieges, and usually those things, their shoots or something, they’re some sort of a show of force for something going on and I ended up out on an island training my controllers and I had to give an air show for the commandant, combined air, Naval gunfire and artillery and that’s something you don’t do. We had a whole radar system in Vietnam set up so that didn’t happen.

RV: Right.

RL: But I then got out of the Marine Corps and I stayed in Reserve for a couple of years, I went into Reserve.

RV: So you Reserved for what, ’70 to ’72?

RL: Yeah. I got out when I found about My Lai. That was it and I moved on, I got out.

RV: Right, right.

RL: But I kept a diary in Vietnam and that diary’s in my historical file and you know what in that diary is significant?

RV: What’s that?

RL: The worst things I write have shown no emotion. There is no emotion in that diary whatsoever. Anything, what you eat is described the same as the worst…the worst situations I ever was is when people were shot down and they were killed.

RV: Right.

RL: They would talk to you on the radio as they’re getting killed, call in artillery on themselves. The other thing is, do you remember the movie, *Platoon*?

RV: Yes.

RL: What was the last scene in *Platoon*, they call an air strike in on themselves.

RV: Yes.

RL: Do you ever wonder what a pilot thinks when they say, ‘Hit the white smoke’, and all the radios go dead? You know, well, we didn’t know they did that. All we know, a bunch of friendlies got killed and they did. They did call in air strikes on themselves because it was better to do that than to get captured. They didn’t capture people really. So, we were left with a lot of questions and a lot of the questions that other people had were answered for me by intelligence reports. But I had no way to
communicate that to anybody but my commanding officer who told me what I could and couldn’t do.

RV: What made you change your mind and come out with all of this and to start writing letters and start talking about it?

RL: Well, I blocked the war out, and then I lost my job and went to the treatment center and they teach...I watch people...see, a lot of people there, they put people together alike. Everybody there was like me, well employed and everything and had done well and all of us, we’re all divorced, we can’t remember the war. What they do is they get you angry so that you’ll deal with the war. And then they teach you ways to deal with the anger and one way they teach you to do is to write, to write down what you think. And I do, I write it down quite often and I throw it away. It’s an expenditure manager. The first time I wrote about My Lai, it was a huge release, but it didn’t stay and the reason it didn’t stay wasn’t because of me, it was because of what kept showing up in the press. Once I saw it in the press, it all came back and so I started responding to the press telling them to shut up. And it took about four letters and then the anger would go away, but I never got over the flashbacks of My Lai and one reason I think it is, is My Lai was a war crime. We grew up in the aftermath of World War II.

RV: Right.

RL: Where war criminals were the Nazis and the [killing] Jews and things like that. I don’t think you can tell an American soldier and call him a war criminal and put the guilt of the world on him. I think it’ll destroy him because everybody I know involved in My Lai is just like me. When Colin Powell ran for president, I heard so many people call in trying to turn him in and I could not believe it and when we get in PTSD groups of people from My Lai, it is irrational today. I just simply don’t think you can call an American a war criminal and I think the same thing’s going to happen to those people in Iraq that are treated that way. You can’t turn the world opinions and make us like somebody that ran a death camp was. I mean, it took me ten years from the time I remembered My Lai until I realized it really happened. I mean, I can remember it, but it took me ten years before and this…we’re talking 1997.

RV: Yes sir.
RL: And then I had the battle with the press. They’re telling me to shut up and I write for the press on the west coast. I just appealed a Northwest Forest Plan in the Supreme Court two years ago. I’m just as much as an investigative reporter as they were. So, they’re telling me to shut up and everything when I’m writing for the press on the west coast that says if I deviate from fact or cover anything up, I’m never going to be seen in print again and I’m getting from Seymour Hersch I’m getting this shut up, they wouldn’t give my documents back. So the major press can do whatever they want and I didn’t, so at the same time, I was writing about My Lai and ultimately sent the legal precedents to the criminal division of the Army about the No Gun Ri court-martial from 2000 Korea [wars]. That disappeared three or four days after I sent them because that came from Calley’s attorney. And I was writing on the west coast perfectly rationally about the Northwest Forest Plan and I kept getting higher and higher until I was dealing with the president of both issues. Ultimately, see, I filed an ethics violation against Seymour Hersch because for the same thing that I was told, to cover things up, and the press wouldn’t do anything, so President Clinton did, he enforced it, but it didn’t do any good. He just brought this thing up about Iraq and he wrote a real spurious book about President Kennedy, remember?

RV: Yes I do. Let me ask you, do you think Seymour Hersch wanted to cover up what you knew and what others knew about the second My Lai?

RL: He did cover it up. He flat told me to be quiet.

RV: He knew about it and so he wanted to basically…since he was the one who broke that story, he wanted to keep that…

RL: I don’t think I broke the story to him. I think he knew about it from the first and I don’t think he brought it up and I wonder why. I’ll tell you one thing, I had it documented. I can prove it; other people couldn’t. I don’t know why. You see, what I told him was, ‘You better watch out. There’s a lot of people involved in My Lai.’ I said, ‘Somebody’s going to come into a position of power that got directly involved,’ and that’s happened. President Bush is in an awkward situation now. I appealed the Northwest Forest Plan to the Supreme Court and he backed me and so did the Interior Department. So, he’s dealing with me, the person that led the strike, killed the people, but at the same time, the secretary of state appears to be the one that orchestrated the
attack. That’s what happens when the press focuses…doesn’t focus a guilt at the right
level. The guilt’s still on us. The two generals manipulated both of us and I knew that. I
was an officer, an intelligence officer. I knew we were all manipulated, but the enlisted
men calling in the radio didn’t.

RV: Right.

RL: So I trust one editor and that’s Mortimer Zuckerman. I’m the one that went
to U.S. News and World Report and sent them my analysis. There’s no way a black
major in an Army division I knew could have any affect on anything since we were all
lied to and manipulated. He couldn’t do one thing. If he’d tried to do something, he’d
been cutting up ice cubes in the Arctic or worse.

RV: So Powell did or did not orchestrate the attack?

RL: I don’t know. He was the Operations Officer at a certain time, but what I’m
getting at, I’ve never met anybody, including the people from the Army that were
involved, that knew what they were doing at the time. It was an entirely different chain
of command from the top to the bottom.

RV: Right.

RL: What I found out from the press, other people found out from the press, other
people found out from other people that Colin Powell may not even know and the other
people know and people never forgotten it. All you had to do was watch the T.V.
specials of the people involved in My Lai, those people were just as affected as
everybody. I mean, they broke down and cry, some were suicidal, living in poverty, all
on disability. And that comes from the guilt. That comes from the guilt. You have your
own guilt, that’s almost intolerable. You can’t take the guilt of the world; I just don’t
think you can and I’m saying this because I went instantly from one to the other. I didn’t
give a damn about My Lai, didn’t care anything about it, I was a civilian and in thirty
seconds, I’d blocked it out after I found the [target] coordinates in my flight log book
because I remembered what happened. So I went from not caring to being hit like
something killed me, instantaneously. And so I think that happened to other people and I
know it happened to other people because I’ve talked to them.

RV: Where do you think it’ll go from here?

RL: Nothing will happen to My Lai.
RV: Okay.

RL: What will happen is, files like mine with ultimately be examined and sure, there’s too many people that know and my file only has a little bit about My Lai. I have a flight log book and a diary that goes with my logbook, so it’s possible to track the missions and know what happened. And then I wrote a book about the things like that and poetry. And so it’s possible proof. And I have pictures. I sent some pictures up. I took pictures of our living area and things, not much from the air. I did take a picture showing My Lai in relationship to Chu Lai, I did that one there. And so I left a historical file in Walla Walla that covers pretty much everything we’ve talked now about. Although, it doesn’t have the emotion and I’d say that the training I had as an infantry officer gave me a different perspective than the training the pilots had that didn’t go through that infantry training because of the fact, I knew what was going on on the ground more. And then I was on the ground. It’s funny; I read books by generals and they didn’t have the overview. General Schwarzkopf who was stationed the same place I was flying simply didn’t have the overview of facts I did because I was flying all over Vietnam and I was reading the intelligence reports for the whole Americal Division and they tended…I’ll tell you what happens, things started repeating themselves over and over and over. So, you were following the same patterns all the time and one reason the My Lai thing stuck out is it didn’t follow a pattern, it broke the pattern.

RV: Right.

RL: And anything that broke the pattern you remembered because day after day, you flew the same places and back and other things broke the pattern.

RV: Right.

RL: But things that broke the pattern, it’s like in your day-to-day work; you drive by the same house and one day it’s gone.

RV: Right.

RL: Okay, that stands out. That’s sort of the way the war was. I never found that long hours of boredom interspersed by periods of stark terror to be true. I found that I was on edge from the time I got there and exhausted the whole time till I left, [and] maybe six months after.
RV: Let me ask you this, do you think the United States learned any lessons from experience in Vietnam?

RL: I think they learned a lot of lessons, but I think we tend to repeat our mistakes over time. I think the whole military changed because of Vietnam. One thing that we did learn and I don’t know that we learned in Iraq, we violated the principles of Carl Von Clausewitz and the nine principles of war. We had a political objective, but we had no military objective and that is what the people who were protesting the war said; we weren’t doing anything. You know what the objective ultimately became was the body count. You couldn’t use hills that we took because we’d take them and give them up and take them again. That’s what really struck me is we kept fighting over the same ground all the time and all we were doing was going after the enemy and then we’d leave, we’d run a sweep and the enemy coming in and from the air, you could see something you couldn’t see from the ground. Almost everywhere we had troops, ground fire came from all around them. It was not like we swept into Europe, it was like a boat in the ocean and the enemy was all around them almost everywhere. And so it wasn’t…I don’t know exactly what we were doing and I just heard on the radio that General Giap said after the war, after the TET Offensive, we won the war, but that’s not what it looked like to me. It looked to me like we were predictable in our actions and they could then act on their initiative against us. And it looked to me like…and I did have the history before I went there. It looked to me like the best we could do is knock them down for a while and they’d just come back up again. Like if we’d gone home and would’ve won, what would we’d won. We’d won a peace for ten, twenty, thirty years and it just would’ve started over again.

RV: Right.

RL: You probably heard the history of Vietnam, the two thousand years tried to fight against the Chinese.

RV: Yes.

RL: Okay, and then they had the gold [Golden Age]…what Vietnam was trying to get back was the golden age of Vietnam when Hue was a college and everything.

That’s what they were trying to get back to, unified and everything, but I’m not sure if
they were unified in that. I wanted to ask one question of you. You must’ve talked to a
lot of people involved in My Lai thing over time. What’s your observation?
RV: Well actually, I haven’t interviewed anybody from the My Lai incident at
all.
RL: You haven’t?
RV: No I have not, but I am going in a few weeks to the Americal Division
Association Reunion and I might have the opportunity at that point to meet some of the
people involved.
RL: Yeah, it’d be interesting.
RV: Yes sir. Let me ask you this, have you ever been to the Wall in
Washington?
RL: I drove by it, but no I didn’t. I did go to a reunion of my infantry people. I
went to a reunion of the A-4 Pilots and I’ll tell you; I couldn’t believe the difference of
the ground forces. There’s formal…we had formal meetings, went to 8th and I dressed
up, just exactly like the Marine Corps. The pilots showed up and the pilots were all
really smart. They had to be like A-minus students. These guys showed up in leathers
and motorcycles and were farmers. I mean, it’s like they got it out of their system, went
and did what they want. We had four foresters there and FBI agents and farmers. The
pilots, they weren’t anything like the ground Marines. When we had the reunion of the
ground Marines, we talked about the medals we had and the Marine Corps and I don’t
remember talking about the Marine Corps at all at the Marine Corps A-4 Pilots Reunion.
We talked about flying and the places we went. It was a different thing.
RV: Was it a good experience for you?
RL: Yeah, yeah, both were. And I wrote a poem, I wrote a long poem for the one
reunion and then at the pilot’s reunion. I got together with a lot of people I’d flown
combat with.
RV: Right.
RL: You know, after years and years, and it’s funny. Remember you mentioned
about relationships.
RV: Yes sir.
RL: You pick up right where you left off.
RV: Really?

RL: It was like yesterday, I talked to them, today I picked up conversation…well, I picked up conversations that were left off. One thing I did get to do, I did get to talk to a friend who wrote to a…I did an MIA investigations of the violation of the Geneva Convention and that was part of the My Lai thing, too. He knew about My Lai and I was close to people on that plane and that plane took off and disappeared in broad daylight and planes didn’t disappear in broad daylight. And I got the investigation and the investigation didn’t make any sense. The investigation…I did the investigation and nothing fit, nothing fit at all. Planes just didn’t check out of North Vietnam and just disappear off the face of the earth.

RV: Right.

RL: And he had maintained contact with that guy’s wife.

RV: Okay.

RL: And something happened after that. Congressional investigations started following me and they followed me for years and they were never shown to me. And I’m wondering, he is one person I know for sure that would’ve known about the My Lai thing. I wonder if he wrote to his wife and his name was Colonel, Major Connors and he lived in Nashville, but there must be two hundred and seventy five Connors living in Nashville, so I never could get a hold of his family. I did…I’m trying to think if I ever…I don’t think I’ve ever contacted anybody. Oh, wait, remember when the Wall, when they had that thing in Washington, D.C. where people could call and ask about what was on the Wall.

RV: Yes.

RL: I got about sick of calls on that. Those people didn’t know anything. And since I was the intelligence officer, I knew them all; I knew all of them. And so they weren’t ever told and I could give the details on what happened. All but one, it was a relief, but the other one, they claimed this person was still alive and everything. You know, they were part of this thing that said that the prisoner is still there and everything and I know for damn sure he isn’t alive because he was drunk and flew at the target and I did the search and nobody in that area was ever captured. But I did talk to six people who called me and all of them were happy because they found out the only things they
ever knew, and the one person I wanted to get called was for Roy Schmidt and I never

got called by his family. And that was a bad one, we lost not only the plane went down,

but both Jolly Greens got shot down. And just a few months ago, one of them was found

and had a Coast Guard pilot in it. And I wrote to the Coast Guard, I was there when that

happened. That sort of thing didn’t bother me at the time and I never forgot it when you

got a pilot down and both Jolly Greens get shot down, you got ten people running around.

RV: Yes. Well, Mr. Lathrop, is there anything else that you’d like to add to our

conservations of the past two days?

RL: No, I think I’ve covered it pretty much.

RV: Okay.

RL: Is there anything you’d want to know?

RV: No sir, if there is, I’ll definitely contact you.

RL: Okay, well I do have a historical file with a lot of stuff in it.

RV: Yes sir.

RL: And they put it, I put it there because of the press trying to steal it
[documents] and the curator was my cousin. So I have everything there and I have an

analysis of the My Lai thing and stuff like that.

RV: Now where’s it located again?

RL: Whitman College, Penrose Library.

RV: Okay.


RV: Okay, well very good. Sir, let me do a quick sign off of the interview. This

will now end our oral history interview with Mr. Robert Lathrop. Thank you, sir.

RL: Yeah.