Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an interview with Bob Barron on the 21st of April 2001 at approximately 2:00. We are in the International Cultural Center at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas. Sir, why don’t we begin with a brief discussion of your early life and I was wondering if you’d please tell us that it was like to grow up in San Antonio, Texas.

Robert Barron: I actually didn’t come… my parents traveled a lot when I was a kid and I actually lived in Pasadena, California, Dallas, Washington DC, and while I was born in San Antonio and my parents were from old San Antonio families, I didn’t actually come back there to live until I was in the fifth grade, but I think it was just an enjoyable town. San Antonio is the biggest small town in America and everybody kind of knew everybody else until fairly recent years and it was kind of like living in a small town. I grew up in a place called Alamo Heights, which is, used to be like a separate suburb, now it is surrounded by the city and was just sort of like small town life.

SM: What did your parents do?

RB: My dad was always a salesman for one person or another and my mother was a career schoolteacher. When my little brother started school she went back to work as a schoolteacher and taught school for over thirty years.
SM: As you were growing up, did you find that having a parent who taught, was that helpful for you?

RB: No, not especially. I don’t think so, she certainly helped me in later years because my youngest child is a daughter who had trouble learning how to read and she was very helpful with her in later life. She gets my award as being a great grandma; she really was a very good teacher.

SM: But in terms of your own schoolwork, it wasn’t?

RB: No, not really I never had much trouble with school and they just always told me to do the homework and I did and so everything seemed to go okay in school.

SM: Okay, and how many siblings did you have?

RB: Well, my brother’s deceased but I have a sister who lives in Plano, Texas. She is also a first grade teacher and she’s two years younger than me.

SM: When you graduated from high school, what year was that?

RB: I graduated from high school in 1957.

SM: Did you immediately have plans to go to school, to continue, college?

RB: Well, yes I think I always thought about going to college and then I was fortunate enough I was a National Merit Scholar and so I went to the University of Notre Dame, this was I think more my father’s choice than mine but it worked out okay.

SM: What did you enjoy in high school, in terms of your studies?

RB: I was in the band; I enjoyed playing in the band and always had a paper route. I enjoyed delivering newspapers, I had a paper route from the time I was twelve until the time I was nineteen and so something that’s probably hard for people to imagine today but I was financially independent when I was a teenager and this is probably, [something that] people of your generation wouldn't understand. I actually, when I was sixteen years old just took some money out of the bank and went and bought a car, without telling my parents and my parents had absolutely no particular problem with that at all, if one of my children had done that, I probably would have killed them.

SM: Was that kind of independence fostered in your family?

RB: Oh, yes, very much so.

SM: So yes, I guess you didn’t have any trouble in school, being a National Merit Scholar, what subjects did you enjoy in terms of sciences, math?
RB: I like to read and I’ve always been very interested in history, and
contemporary affairs.

SM: When you did attend Notre Dame, did you have a particular course of study
that you thought you want to follow or did you kind of?

RB: Well, I went there to study engineering and that didn’t work out to well, so I
transferred into the business school and graduated with a business degree. I really didn't
have the science and math background to be an engineer.

SM: Business school, was it business management, finance?

RB: Finance.

SM: Was that a particular area that you thought you might to find a career?

RB: Yes, in fact I had a pretty good job when I got out of college, this was a
different era, I think we had three or four jobs to choose from when we got out of college
and I took a job in consumer finance, started at the bottom in consumer finance, what
you’d call a repo man, I pulled in cars out in El Paso for the first six months I got out of
college because that’s how you start at the bottom in that business and then I had to go
into the Army. And I went into the Army, originally I was supposed to have gone for six
months, in those days, an ROTC commitment gave you either six months or two years,
but the Russian put the Berlin Wall up, and the Berlin Wall going up and coming down
were the bookends of my military career, because what happened was I got changed to
two years, not only that, they changed me to Armor from Finance Corps, so I became a
two year tanker, whether I liked it or not.

SM: There’s quite a difference between the two, were you surprised and did you
try to change it back or?

RB: Oh, you couldn’t do anything; in our generation you just did what you were
told.

SM: So you were in ROTC while you were at Notre Dame and you received your
commission upon Graduation, I assume. What led you to enroll in ROTC?

RB: Well, the school I went to in San Antonio was a military high school, you
have to understand that San Antonio was a very military town, I go all the way back to
the Korean War, the American Legion had a program for youngsters called the junior
Yanks, I knew close order drill when I was eleven years old. When I was thirteen I
started in school and had my own M-1 rifle and we wore combat boots to school ever
day, so being in the ROTC meant absolutely nothing to me, it was a natural part of life,
so I had eight years, plus of military training before I ever got my commission.
SM: Did you enjoy ROTC?
RB: Not especially but I think in retrospect probably the order of it had did me
some good. I think that’s somewhat attractive, but no I wasn’t a great success in the
military in ROTC.
SM: While you were at Notre Dame, there were a couple of interesting
international developments, in particular of course, the successful launch of Sputnik and I
was wondering if you remembered that event and the impact that it had, the discussion it
might have generated amongst you and your college mates?
RB: I don’t remember Sputnik being of any great moment to us, not specifically,
I just remember it happening. I would think that most of us felt at that time, that while the
United States might have behind, its something that we would ultimately get ahead, I
think we had a kind of a feeling that the Americans could do anything.
SM: Did you keep up with a lot of the political events and international affairs
while you were in college or was something that didn’t interest you?
RB: Well, a really big deal while I was at Notre Dame was Kennedy being
elected President. We were all Irish, well, everybody at Notre Dame’s not Irish, but I am,
but getting an Irishman and particularly a Catholic elected President was a big deal and
we all really just worshipped JFK and so we were very cognizant of that, that was a big
deal and when we graduated in ’61, I think an awful lot of people went into public service
because of JFK.
SM: Were you raised Catholic?
RB: Oh sure, yes. If you’re Irish, you just are.
SM: Okay, had you, of course there was an awful lot of interest and in some
circles, concern about Kennedy being elected because he was Catholic and of course
there’s been an anti-papist stream in American history, had you ever encountered
anything yourself concerning that?
RB: Oh, yes anti-Catholicism is just a part of life. The first commanding officer I
had in the Army hated Catholics and I ran into some bigotry in that area which was really
kind of a disappointment to me when I first was a platoon leader in a tank company at
Fort Hood. Of course at Notre Dame there was always a lot of people in the town didn’t
like us because we were Catholics and so forth, but there was probably a lot about us not
to like.

SM: Okay, well in Notre Dame and in the surrounding community, what was the
cause of that tension and why do you think they didn’t like Catholics?
RB: Because, well at that time, in the ‘50s, South Bend, Indiana had a real tough
time economically and we had a lot of money and they didn’t, I think, or it didn’t seem to
us like we had a lot of money, but in those days you didn’t work your way through
college because college wasn’t that expensive and so we all were sort of being, you won’t
believe this, but you could pay for college with a summer job, so we didn't really work
and we sort of, we could go downtown on the bus and go to the movies or something and
that looked like we were really rich.

SM: Must have been nice. Did you also have jobs though, I mean you in
particular did you take any jobs while you were in college?
RB: Well in the summertime I had huge newspaper routes, I would come home
and deliver three or four hundred newspapers, involved working from like one in the
morning to like seven in the morning and then doing some more work in the evening,
collection, but you could actually pay for college with that, in addition to my scholarship.

SM: Did you do any kind of work in the Notre Dame area?
RB: No, I never worked while I was there.

SM: That’s pretty interesting. I do want to talk about it now, although it’s a little
bit further on in your experiences, when you did encounter anti-Catholicism in your first
duty assignment in the Army, in what form did that anti-Catholicism occur?
RB: I don’t think he ever did anything to me, he just kept making disparaging
remarks about Catholics, but I don’t think he ever did anything to harm me or anything
like that. It was just annoying, and I’ll have to say that Notre Dame was very competitive
in those days, it was different than the way college is now, we started with 1400 in my
class and ended with 800. They enjoyed flunking people out and so we all became very
defensive about, I would say that most Notre Dame students of my class were fairly
arrogant, if we survived, we thought we were pretty hot shit, I guess is one way to put it.
So I don’t know that we were that, one of the other guys, one of my classmates was in the same battalion oddly enough, and I think he had the same experience.

SM: Within your unit itself, did you know other Catholics, other officers or other senior NCOs or anybody that was Catholic that didn’t necessarily like the Commander’s comments?

RB: No, I don’t think the subject ever came up, to my recollection, I don’t think there were any Catholics that I noticed in the company. The Army in those days was different; I don’t think there were anybody else that was a Catholic.

SM: What were, while you were at Notre Dame, of course this the height of the Cold War, other activities going on in the United States, civil rights movement, what not, what was the tenor of relationships between different ethnic groups, I mean we already discussed the religious, some of the religious and of course the anti-Irish I guess, might have been attached to the anti-Catholic, or was it?

RB: There was a good deal of regional resentments at Notre Dame. They say that people from Chicago and New York were always kind of putting down the guys from the South and the guys from the South didn’t like the people from the North, there was a lot of that sort of thing, which I’m sure doesn’t happen today because of the homogeneity of the populace. In the ‘50s and ‘60s people were very different, people form Arkansas just weren’t like people from Maine and they still aren’t but they’re a lot closer than they were in the ‘50s and ‘60s and you literally -- you may notice that I don’t speak with much of a Southern accent, well I can tell you when I went to Notre Dame I did, but as a defense mechanism at Notre Dame and in the Army, I pretty much lost my accent without really trying, it was just sort of a reflex action to avoid problems. If I get excited I have a very strong Southern accent.

SM: Interesting, okay. Was there anything else that occurred at Notre Dame while you were going to school there that was particularly memorable?

RB: No, I don’t think so, you mentioned the civil rights movement, that was a pretty big deal in the ‘50s, but really kind of accelerated after I got out of college I guess, but in the ‘50s, it was still an important part of America.

SM: Well, had you heard of things like the incident at Little Rock and the [?]

RB: Oh my goodness, yes.
SM: What did you think of those types of events as they were unfolding?

RB: I was very liberal in my younger days and so I applauded that. You had to, the idea of segregation just never made any sense to me and it really didn't in my family, my father and mother raised us more or less color blind and so, I think that the civil rights movement was not any, at that time I believed anything the federal government wanted to do to further the cause of integration was probably okay.

SM: How about the rest of San Antonio, and was there any segregation in Texas?

RB: Oh sure, San Antonio was under the same Jim Crow laws as the rest of Texas, but again there are very few black people in San Antonio, oddly enough, still aren’t as the percentage of the population and so they integrated the schools without any problem and I don’t think there was ever any problems in San Antonio to speak of. I’m sure if I was black I’d feel differently, but I don’t think there was ever anything that was of any great significance as far as civil rights.

SM: Well, so you got out of school, you graduated from Notre Dame in ’61, and you were out working as a repo man for a certain amount of time, when did you actually go on active duty?

RB: November the 28th.

SM: November 28, of ’61?

RB: Yes.

SM: That’s when you received your orders that your commitment had been changed to two years and?

RB: No, I’d gotten that during the summer.

SM: You got it during the summer.

RB: Yes, they didn’t sneak up on me.

SM: So why don’t you go ahead and describe your introduction into active duty Army life.

RB: Well the first thing you do so go to a basic course, which in those days was eight or nine weeks long, so I went to Fort Knox, Kentucky, which is where beginning tankers learned their trade and I drove up there and it was very, very cold and we stayed in these kind of primitive BOQs, and I remember our room didn’t have any heat, that wouldn't happen in the Army today, but we went through all of December and January
without any heat, because they could never get the heat fixed and so my roommate who
was from New Orleans and I basically survived there without any heat through it. And I
took two weeks for Christmas and came home for Christmas leave and then went back, so
I was tearing up the road in the is little ’61 Ford Falcon I had, that was fifty some odd,
five or five thousand mile I drove in the days before Interstates. Then when I finished the
basic course, I did not do too well at it because I’m not real mechanically apt, I had to
learn that all the hard way, its hard for a tanker not to be mechanically apt, but I’ve
learned how internal combustion engines worked since then and there were also a bunch
of National Guardsmen there who had been activated for the Berlin crisis and they were
going their branch qualification and so they were kind of hard to get along with because
they were very weak on education, some of them I don’t think were barely high school
graduates but they were real good practical tankers, so we had all of them there, and so
they were real good at [mechanical] stuff so that kind of drilled us down to the bottom of
the class. These are guys that had been in the Guard for five or six years and had gotten
commissions but they had never been to their branch school. Then I went form there to
Fort Hood, Texas and what they had done, because of the Berlin crisis, at Fort Carson
and at Fort Hood they had formed two new divisions, Kennedy had made the Army two
divisions bigger because of the Berlin crisis and he had called up two National Guard
divisions, the 49th Texas and the 32nd Wisconsin and they were on active duty, pending
the completion of training of these two new divisions, one of which was the 1st Armored
at Fort Hood, which I joined and so there was a good deal of pressure on us to get
qualified, quote, unquote, so these National Guardsmen could go home. This was a
political footballing, ant time you federalized the National Guard that's politically fraught
with peril and the 49th Armored was at Fort Polk, Louisiana rioting because they wanted
to go home and so the point of the story is that when we got to Fort Hood we
immediately went to the field and we basically stayed in the field from March through
October or so which was just wonderful training, and I was a bachelor, I didn’t care and
we just stayed out there and I learned to sleep standing up in the turret of a tank and we
were really very well trained, it was mostly just draftees and new officers and then the
whole thing culminated, unintentionally with the Cuban Missile Crisis. So the Cuban
Missile Crisis, we were declared combat ready and by golly since you’re combat ready,
why don’t you go to Florida and we’ll put the tanks on LSTs and you can invade Cuba, and so we did that. We flew out of Connelly Air Base in Waco, Kennedy nationalized the civilian air fleet, so we got on these 707s, with stewardesses and everything and carrying our weapons, we didn’t know where we were going and they announced that we were flying to Savannah, Georgia, because its near Fort Stewart, we went to Fort Stewart for a while, then the tanks kept going down to Florida, they put them on the LSTs and we took buses to Florida and got on and floated around and the thing was over, and so then we all came home. So that was fairly exciting.

SM: yes, sit. How did you transport tanks, rail?

RB: Rail flat cars, yes.

SM: And when you say you got on these LSTs in Florida, were you actually going towards Cuba, steaming towards Cuba?

RB: Yes, I assume so.

SM: You were out at sea; you were on your way?

RB: Well, we were out there waiting to see what we were going to do.

SM: How long were you at sea?

RB: Seems like we were only other there three or four days, it seemed like a long time to me because I was the only officer in the landing force who didn’t get sick. I’m not subject to motion sickness and you have to check the lashings on the tanks, which are down in the bottom of the ship, so every four hours, whether I was sleeping or not, I had to go down and see if the tanks had shifted, which of course they didn’t because the sailors wouldn’t let us not tie them down real good. We also paused for a while at the Gulf Stream Park Race Track; we stayed there for a while before we got on the LSTs. It was kind of exciting and I was thinking about that this last year, I had a major operation on my sinuses because the week before the Cuban Missile Crisis I broke my nose, my tank ran into a ditch and I hit the periscope guard with my nose and it broke, but the gun came out of battery and messed my knee up real bad too, and I was more worried about my knee then my nose. I never got my nose fixed and now at the age of sixty I got to get my nose fixed, so I would advise anybody of your age to, if you ever get your nose broken, get it fixed right the first time, that’s an aside. Anyway, after the Cuban Missile Crisis I came back and then I got my first logistics job in the Army because I had a
business degree from Notre Dame and I wore glasses and what happened was when we went to Florida and Georgia, we just went and grabbed a whole bunch of ammunition and put it in the tanks, and nobody really accounted for all this ammunition. Well, a basic load of tank ammunition is very valuable and its very expensive and so when we came back we had to sort all this mess out and so they grabbed me and said okay, Barron, you go sort it out, so I did that for three or four months and lost my cushy job as a tank platoon leader and went into basically, I would up doing several logistics jobs in the course of my Army career but at any rate. After that I went to Korea, because I decided that the Army maybe wasn’t so bad after all and this two years was okay, and gee, they Army when it actually did something was kind of fun to be with and I really liked tanks a lot, still do to this day and I went to Korea and I was in the cavalry squadron that had the Guard posts on the DMZ in Korea, so I spent a year in Korea that squadron, 1st Squadron, 9th U.S. Cavalry, right near Punmunjum, and so I got to do a lot of interesting things there, out in the DMZ quite a bit. I was the communications officer so whenever they cut a line in the DMZ I had to go out there at night and get it repaired and so that was kind of exciting on occasion.

SM: Did you ever run into any North Koreans?
RB: Oh sure, yes. We lost five guys the year I was there. It was a fairly active war, they would come across and we’d go across and there was quite a bit of activity, but it was all very sub-rosa, because if anybody got shot you didn’t get a purple heart or anything like that. It was a very different kind of deal but it was a real good assignment to have and I came back from there and went, then I got married, that was important, and my wife and I went off to Fort Knox Kentucky again and I became a company commander. My first job after I was married was as a company commander in a training company.

SM: Let me take you a step back, I wanted to ask you one last thing about the Cuban Missile Crisis. What kind of briefings did you receive, as you were getting ready and getting on the boats and starting to steam around?
RB: Not much, well what they basically told us was that the Marine Division and the Airborne would get the beachhead that we were not really supposed to get a beachhead. In other words it would not be whatever the Naval equipment of a hot LZ we
would just basically, the LSTs would ride up and we’d ride off the LSTs and that the 2nd Marine Division and the Airborne would have the beachhead, so we weren’t really as worried as we should have been. We have found out in recent years that Khrushchev had released authority to use the nukes to the Russian Generals on the ground, so I guess we would have been incinerated. If we’d have known that we would probably, well we wouldn’t have been scared, we were too dumb to be scared, but it would have been different. But no, they didn’t give us any great details and I’m sure they would have, if the order had been to go, we had all this stuff in the safe on the ship and I think we were supposed to look at it then, but I don’t think they wanted anybody to know until we had to know.

SM: So you had no idea that there were active nukes?
RB: Oh, heck no. We knew there were a lot of Russians in Cuba, we did know that and we figures well they have Russian tanks, we have American tanks, we can do that.

SM: How did they brief you for the mission, did they use the maps, photographs, overhead photograph intelligence, stuff like that?
RB: Maps, I don’t think there was any aerial photos that I saw.
SM: Did you feel comfortable, prepared, did you think that you and unit were well enough trained to do what you were tasked to do, had you [?]
RB: Yes, the troops we were pretty confident about, we weren’t too confident about the equipment. We had old M-48 A-1 gas burners that I didn’t like very much. They would catch fire too easily. All tanks now are diesel-powered, when they used gasoline it just was too, to me too dangerous. You had to stand on the back deck with the fire extinguisher every time you started it.

SM: Why, what would catch fire?
RB: Oh, there would be a lot of fire coming out of the exhaust so you wanted to make sure that that didn’t catch anything. If there was any fuel that had spilled around the back deck or something you wanted to be sure you could get the fire put out.
SM: The M-48, is that what you were trained on at Fort Knox?
RB: Yes.
SM: So this was a consistent tank for you?
RB: Oh, yes. Well, over the course of my career there was no tank the U.S had that I didn’t become an expert in because later on I got into research and development. Anyway, I was in the training center, commanding a company after I got married and again, I had reservations about the Army. I’d been to Korea, had a lot of fun there, but this was one of those low points, I didn't really like being a Training Center Commander very much and I was about ready to resign and then I had a battalion commander who convinced me that I ought to stay around a little bit longer and he’d get me a regular Army commission, which he did, well he helped me, I mean he helped me, he couldn’t do that but he gave me a strong help. In those days you had reserve officers and regular Army officers and if you didn’t have a regular Army commission, you didn't really have the job security that I liked. If I was going to stay in I wanted the job security, sort of like tenure in the academic world, you should try and get that. Anyway, I got my regular Army commission and then I went into an organization at Fort Knox that wrote field manuals and wrote tests, troop tests of equipment and personnel doctrine, that was my first kind of academic job in the Army and that was kind of fun, because I liked to sit around and write and so even military field manuals had to be written grammatically, somebody had to do that and so I did that and by then, then I went to Vietnam, this was after Tet of ’68, which was kind of a watershed as you probably know and you kind of had to go to Vietnam if you were a career soldier and I was sort of interested in staying in the Army for a career then. I had my career aspirations had a renasance at that time, I said yes, I’m going to do this for thirty years, but I wanted to go to Vietnam as an advisor and of course everybody said, geez, you just got a regular Army commission, you’re career oriented, being an advisor is the worst possible thing you can do, you’ve got to go in a U.S. unit because that’s the real ticket punch. That was when the term ticket punching, which you may or may not be familiar with, but it came into vogue and everybody had to have a ticket punch and I said well, if I’m going to spend a year away from my family, and by this time my wife’s pregnant and I was going to be in Vietnam when my first son was born, turned out to be true, I said, I’m not going to put up with all this crap unless I’m going to do something I think is valuable, so I’m going to be an advisor. And everybody I talked to thought well, the ARVN units aren’t very good, what you want to do is get with the RFs and PFs and the population security, I didn’t know at
the time, it was called the Cords effort, and so that was what I did. I went to a school at
Fort Gordon to learn how to do that and then I went to Vietnam as a district senior
advisor and I was almost twenty-nine years old at this time, so I knew everything about
what we were going to do about the war and wound up in Tuy Hoa which is in Phu Yen
province, north of Nha Trang. Funny story, one of the guys I was in school with at Fort
Gordon, was scared to death of going to Vietnam, which was kind of odd because he was
a West Pointer and I always had the idea that West Pointers didn’t do that but he was
terrified and he found out that there was another district in Phu Yen province called Son
Cau, an old Japanese naval base, that nothing ever happened at, and so he got the orders
switched in Nha Trang, being a West Pointer and so I got Tuy Hoa, which was pretty
active and he got Son Cau and I’ve never regretted it because I enjoyed being where I
was and it was fun, and I really felt like we did something there. As you’ve heard a
thousand times, everybody in Vietnam, depending on where you were, when you were
and what you were doing, it was a completely different war, and the war I was in, we
won. I was there from April of, no August of ’68 to August of ’69 and during that period,
security just got infinitely better, everything seemed to get a whole lot better during the
year that we were there, and we had some low spots, I had two MATT teams, these are
mobile advisory teams commanded by captains and I lost one of them in July of 1969 and
so that was a real low spot right before I came home and it, I still felt real bad about that
and the, I think I would say we were basically successful during that year, although I
think one thing that I never did find out satisfactorily, I don’t know if this is the time to
ask it, but one of the things that I was told at the time I lost this MATT team, was very
unusual engagement in that the NVA, we’d never fought any VC, they were all killed
during Tet, so everybody we fought was NVA again that’s one of those peculiar things.
Everybody says, you fought NVA main force units with Rough Puffs and I said of
course, because that’s the only enemy we had, but they were so starved out and in such
bad shape that it really wasn’t as hard as you would think. They had massed their forces,
attacked the hill where the MATT team was with an RF company and a couple of PF
platoons and obviously had targeted the Americans, and after the battle the CIA guy in
town told me, well they’re targeting Americans, they’re trying to influence peace
demonstrations, they’re trying up the casualty count, he said, we’ve know that. I really
got mad because I thought if you’d have told me I would have pulled the Americans in, I
wouldn’t have left this out on this hill. I’ve never heard anybody say if that was true or
not, if they ever tried to coordinate their attacks with demonstrations in the United States,
one of those questions I’ve never answered, but I do know that the CIA station rep in Tuy
Hoa, which was a province capitol, thought that was the case.
SM: Well, I’m curious what you knew about Vietnam; okay you were at Fort
Knox from 1960 what, ’62, ’63?
RB: 65-68, I had tow jobs at Fort Knox, plus I went to the career course so I
stayed there from May of ’68 until I went to Vietnam.
SM: May of ’65 until you went to Vietnam?
RB: Yes, May of ’65 till May of ’68.
SM: So you were in Korea from sixty-what to ’65?
RB: April ’64 till April ’65.
SM: When you were in Korea, of course things had started to heat up in Vietnam,
you get the Gulf of Tonkin incident, or a year prior to that you had the assassination of
President Diem just before the assassination of Kennedy, how did those events, were you
aware of them, what about the Kennedy assassination, how did that affect you and your
unit, wherever you were?
RB: Oh, the Kennedy assassination, I was at Fort Hood when that happened. Oh,
yes that was a big deal because I was a communications officer for the battalion at that
time and we had an AM radio that we could tune to the AP frequency and so we were
getting bulletins off the AP in this little shack up by the motor pool and so we had the
most up-to-date data. In this day of CNN and all, it’s hard to imagine but it was very
hard to keep up with things, they interrupted the news on the television and all but they
didn’t really have up-to-date bulletins. I was pretty politically aware and I was not as, I
believed then and believe now that Kennedy wasn’t as liberal as everybody thought and
in retrospect everybody thinks of Jack Kennedy as being sort of liberal and he was by no
means a liberal, and as strange as it may seem now where I’m much more conservative, I
really applauded Lyndon Johnson. I was much more liberal than Jack Kennedy and I
really at the time didn’t think that the death of Jack Kennedy and the ascension of LBJ
would make that much difference, but yes at the time we actually had a formation and
they made a formal announcement of the change of command and it was, made sure that all the troops, everybody knew where all the troops were and this was not a coup d’etat and there was a formal announcement to the troops that there had been a change in government and so forth. It was not exactly what I expected but the death of Kennedy was a pretty big deal.

SM: And while you were in Korea, being in Asia, had you heard or did you hear while you were there much about some of the early activities in Vietnam, that is the advisory effort.

RB: We knew quite a bit about it. I had a good friend at Fort Hood who went over there, they sent a lot of tankers over there to be advisors to the Vietnamese Armored units which were basically, in the early days were in 1-1-3s [armored personnel carriers], and one of them, Earl Quantock, got blown off a track and got his head all messed up and that was part of the reason why I wanted to get a regular Army commission before I went over there, because they just kicked Earl out of the Army. If you were a reservist and you go hurt they just said, hey go call the VA on the phone and you get your medical care taken care of, where if you’re a regular you got a better deal and so, I hate to sound like a bureaucrat but that’s kind of the way I was thinking, I didn't really want to go to Vietnam until I got a regular Army commission. We knew quite a bit about Vietnam, one of my commanders at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis, well he was the Captain that didn’t like Catholics, he was one of the early guys over there. He went over in about 1963 or so, he was a very early advisor over there, in the John Paul Vann era I guess, he had left and gone over there early. I remember standing and talking to our club manager when I was in Korea and we had this supreme self-confidence and this was right before I came home from Korea and I said, well we won’t have any trouble, the Americans will just pave that country if we need to, and I remember he got real mad at me, Mr. Park, and he never got mad at anybody. He was a very even-tempered guy, which was a good idea for the job he had, but here was this 1st Lieutenant mouthing off something he thought was really stupid and boy he said so, and I’ve never forgotten that. Americans just can’t go to Asia and so anything you want to, and hey, you know what, he was right.

SM: Well, that’s an interesting point, had you read books like The Ugly American, prior to going to Vietnam or since?
RB: Oh, yes I read all of Bernard Fall and I’m sure I’ve read The Ugly
American, but yes I certainly knew how to be an advisor I think before I went over there.
SM: Again, do you remember if that was specifically before Vietnam that you
read the book or after?
RB: Probably before.
SM: Did they talk about those types of issues when you received your training at
Fort Gordon?
RB: Oh sure, yes. It was a civil affairs school, getting along with the Vietnamese
was covered in some detail. This was not to be confused with the MATA course at Fort
Bragg, which was more combat and so forth. We didn’t’ really have much combat
training at all, it was all about getting along with the Vietnamese and so forth.
SM: And what do you remember most about the period ’64 to ’65 when you were
in Korea, what you were hearing about Vietnam?
RB: Not a whole lot. It really wasn’t talked about much at that time. We had
problems of our own to be honest with you.
SM: Well, yes taking casualties and what not, you had your own war, really.
RB: We really didn’t, I don’t think most of us really thought Vietnam would
amount to much.
SM: Did there seem to be good relations between the U.S. military and the
Korean civilian population around where you were serving?
RB: Yes, I think so. The only ones that lived there, the way things worked in
Korea, the divisions were in an area called the 1st Cavalry Division Area, and this was a
piece of Korean soil that belonged to the 1st Cavalry division and this was before there
was a Status of Forces Agreement and so the only Koreans that lived there, lived there at
the sufferance of the 1st Cavalry Division so they certainly got along with us. I guess
there were 10,000 Americans in the Cavalry Division and 20,000 hookers, so they
certainly got along and plenty of club owners and that was basically who lived there. It
was something again, that was somewhat unimaginable to Americans of this era, there
are just so many prostitutes everywhere.
SM: Were there any rules about American activities or interaction with civilians?
RB: You weren’t supposed to kill them, and in fact if you beat them up you could
get in trouble, but that was about it. There was no Status of Forces Agreement, so you
couldn’t really do much. It was kind of like the Old West.
SM: But you weren’t told, you guys can’t go to the prostitutes, you can’t do this,
you can’t do that.
RB: Oh, no they didn’t care what we did, once you’re off duty, this was a
different Army. There was a box of condoms on the 1st Sergeant’s desk and they had
actual short arm inspections to find out who had the clout, again, it was a different Army.
There were fights in town all the time, I remember we had a Turkish company in the
Cavalry division and everybody talked about how tough the Turks were and the first time
I saw the Turks, I’d never seen a Turk before, but they were like real short and I thought,
well why is everybody so scared of the Turks, then they all had knives, I thought oh,
okay, now I understand.
SM: And how about ROK forces, were there many in your area, did you join
operations with ROK forces?
RB: No, not until I got to Vietnam, I was with a ROK unit in Vietnam. There was
a ROK unit right near us in Vietnam and we did run some joint operations with them.
SM: Did your service in Korea help you at all, later when you found yourself in
Vietnam?
RB: Oh, sure
SM: With Asians?
RB: Yes, I always, you know, Asia is Asia to some extent. Think back to that old
Kipling doggerel about its only a fool who tried to hustle the East, Asiatics are different
from Occidentals and I learned that fairly early on in Korea and that helped in Vietnam,
very definitely. Not to say that the Vietnamese and the Koreans were anything like each
other, but its still an Asiatic way of looking at things, they take the long view I guess
would be a simple way of putting it.
SM: Was there anything else that you took away from Korea that was helpful,
and other particular insights into the Asian perspective, Asian culture?
RB: No, I guess not.
SM: Did you learn to speak any of the language?
RB: Yes, in fact I had some friends, a couple of academics were on sabbatical to Seoul right now and we had a going away party and they couldn’t remember how to say Ini Hashimika or Comob Su Mi Da or Cho Moneo, I was trying to explain some of these things to them, said for crying out loud you all lived over there for two years and I was only there for one and I’m trying to explain this to you, learned more in Korea than Vietnam, I had great trouble with Vietnamese because I’m one of those tone deaf people they talk about it.

SM: And Korean is not a tonal language.

RB: Korean is not tonal, no.

SM: And Vietnamese is. What about the food, Korean food?

RB: Oh, I like Korean food.

SM: Kim Chi and all that?

RB: Yes, we still eat Korean every couple of months or so in San Antonio.

SM: Was there anything you did at Fort Knox that was particularly helpful in terms of your time in Vietnam?

RB: I talked to people interminably about it because that was after the war started and all these guys were coming back, so Vietnam was no mystery by 1968, half the guys in my career course had just come back from Vietnam and most of them were going back again. It was pretty grim, my best fried from Fort Hood had become a helicopter pilot, he got shot on his first tour and he was still limping, he came home for six months, went back for a second year. They said, well you don’t have to stand up to fly a helicopter, you can go back. I thought, in a country this big we ought to be able to get more guys [to fight the war].

SM: Well what do you remember most about some of your discussions with Vietnam vets when they came back and served in Fort Knox with you?

RB: Well I was sort of, what was part of my resolution to become an advisor. It really became evident to me that the U.S. units and the North Vietnamese main force units were just sort of neutralizing each other and that if, population security was the name of the game, the people who secured the populace were the district and province troops and that would be the place where you could influence the action and again, very American, I really wanted to be where I could influence the action and do something of
some value if I was going to be there for a year, so all these conversations led me to believe that the last place I wanted to be was in some cavalry squadron riding up and down Route 19 trying to keep bridges from getting blown.

SM: Was there, how would they typically refer to the Vietnamese people when you talked to them?

RB: Not particularly favorably. I don’t think anybody really, the guys in the U.S. units knew the Vietnamese people and the guys that had been advisors pretty much liked them, but they did advise me that you had to watch out and make sure they didn’t run away, which was always a problem.

SM: Was it typically VC, Mr. Charles or more derogatory expressions that you heard from American soldiers when they came back?

RB: They’d just always call them VC or Charlie.

SM: So it was in ’68 that you went to Fort Gordon and attended the civil affairs school, what do you remember most about that school in terms of curriculum?

RB: Well, I met John Paul Vann, I think he was a remarkable guy, I really liked him. I still think he was the greatest advisor since Lawrence of Arabia and, who by the way, he couldn’t speak Vietnamese either.

SM: Vann couldn’t?

RB: No, but he was a very charismatic guy. I think everybody kind of liked him because he’d kicked over the traces; he was the great whistleblower who had given Halberstam his Pulitzer and all that. If you were a Notre Dame guy, you kind of like that sort of thing.

SM: How about his reputation as womanizer, had that reached the U.S. yet?

RB: No, until they wrote the book I don’t think anybody knew it. Well, I guess people knew it who knew him better than I did, but until the book came out I had no idea, no telling what he could have done if he wasn’t spending all his time on that.

SM: When you say book you’re talking about Bright Shining Lie?

RB: Bright Shining Lie, yes.

SM: Neil Sheehan’s book. In terms of the actual curriculum, that is, what they talked about, what you learned about Vietnam and the Vietnamese culture and society, what do you remember from the school, anything?
RB: Not really. I don’t, to be honest with you, think it was that helpful. It was kind of good to be thinking about some of these things I guess, but if there was anything there that really helped me, it didn’t stick in my mind.

SM: I didn’t know if they had just covered some of the basic things like, I understand.

RB: Well I understood how the Vietnamese were organized and you understood how things were supposed to work in Vietnam, yes that was helpful.

SM: And how about cultural taboos, you don’t pat children on the head, don’t cross your fingers, things like that?

RB: Don’t cross your legs and point your foot at them, yes, I’m sure they covered all that. As it turned out they sort of felt like the Americans were so stupid I don’t think they would have cared what we would have done.

SM: Did they at least try to teach some of the rudiments of language while you were there?

RB: Oh sure, they tried, but I just wasn’t. Yes, it was my fault, not theirs. No, we had classes.

SM: How long was that training?

RB: Two months.

SM: And overall do you think they did okay?

RB: Oh sure, they did what they were supposed to do. We were with a big war, didn’t have time to give everybody a year’s training before we went over there. We weren’t really that disconnected from things to where we really, by the time I was there, there were so many Americans there that, and we were not that far out in the woods that we really needed, like that young lady talked this morning, she had to learn how to speak Vietnamese so she could shop, well we were hardly shopping.

SM: I didn’t hear the presentation.

RB: It was a young lady who was a nurse over there in Ban Me Thuot and she had to learn how to speak Vietnamese so she could go to the market and buy stuff. Now, I didn’t have to go to the market and buy stuff.
SM: Okay, in terms of what you were being taught at the civil affairs school, what did they teach you in terms of what your job would be and did that actually correlate to what you did in Vietnam?

RB: It did. It was designed for the, what they called CORRDS advisors, the district and province advisors so yes, it was exactly what I was trained to do

SM: Had you heard much about CORRDS, Civil Operations, Revolutionary or Rural Development Support?

RB: IF I knew about it before the school I guess it didn’t register on me but I liked the idea of the integrated chain of command and everybody being, sort of together, and it actually worked. I worked for a State Department officer and I had a State Department guy working for me and it did seem to make sense that the civil and the military should be doing things together.

SM: Did they talk about the CIA in training and the coordination between the CIA in these operations?

RB: Oh, yes and when I found out more about them when I got to Vietnam, I found out a lot about the CIA when I got to Vietnam because the foreign service reservist, who was my deputy, was a fellow named Ellis Wisner, whose father was a fellow named Frank Wisner who was one of the guys who founded the modern CIA and was their first Chief of Covert Operations, and who later killed himself. But Frank, Jr. and Ellis and their sister, of all people, all went to Vietnam and they were all there and Ellis took me over to, there was a compound where all the CIA guys were that nobody went to called the embassy and Ellis, when I first got there, took me over there and introduced me to everybody and says oh, there’s a bunch of damned spooks, don’t pay attention to them, the mystique is what makes the all so valuable and so, yes I learned a lot about the CIA when I first got there. They’re not as infallible as everybody thought. The programs that they had that were not covert were generally not too successful which makes you worry a lot about how successful our covert programs are, and that’s kind of my book on the CIA in Vietnam.

SM: Well, had you heard about the Phoenix program?

RB: Oh, yes.

SM: Was that before or after you got to Vietnam?
RB: I think they covered it in the school, but I found out a lot more about when I
got to Vietnam. That was, the CIA wanted the district advisors to sign off on all the
orders, sending the provincial reconnaissance units out to assassinate people and I was
smart enough, I don’t know if it really ever made any difference, but I never would sign
any of those orders because I knew they weren’t really going to take prisoners, that they
really were going out there to kill people and I wasn’t real smart, but I had an idea that
maybe that was probably a war crime and so maybe I ought not to do that. But, yes they
did put a lot of pressure on the district advisors to sign those orders be they wanted
somebody else on the blame line. And to be honest with you, by the time the Phoenix
program was really going after people big time it was toward the end of my tour and
frankly if they had asked me the first month I was there, I would have probably signed it,
because I was too green to know the difference but by the time I’d been there six or eight
months I had a pretty good idea what was going on and so the Phoenix program, but
don’t get me wrong, I thought it was very successful, most of the people they
assassinated, they probably should have, but I just had a funny idea that you shouldn’t,
because these guys are on of the provincial reconnaissance units were pretty spooky guys,
no pun intended, and those guys weren’t going to take anybody prisoner, they were
basically hit men, the Vietnamese equivalent of hit men.

SM: Now the PRUs that you did see, you actually did see some?

RB: Oh sure, yes.

SM: Did they have American counterparts as well, that worked with PRUs?

RB: Well sure, they were from the CIA, but what they basically were was
hoodlums. In Vietnamese society, that’s who you would get to do something like that is
hoodlums. I knew a little better about that because my counterpart had three or four of
them that he used for bodyguards and so everywhere we went for the year, we basically
were surrounded by these guys. An earlier counterpart had referred to them as torpedoes,
the old Chicago mafia, and so we always went every place with the torpedoes and they
were really kind of spooky guys too. But if they’re protecting you, you don’t mind.

SM: The PRUs that you did see, I mean did you coordinate activities with them
at all?

RB: No, I just basically knew where they were going.
SM: So this was just because activity was occurring in your AO?
RB: Oh, yes you have to know what they’re doing.
SM: You have to know what they were doing.
RB: Well, you’re hoping that you know what’s going on. In a big district like Tuy Hoa, which had a city in it as well as a bunch of villages, there is stuff going on all the time with all kinds of people. We had an ARVN regiment there, we had some, every once in a while, 173rd would come trooping through and we had Koreans in the district south of us and then you had the national police field forces would come in and some guy would come in and say, well we’re going to run an operation, so that’s what a district staff does, is try and clear all the nonsense.
SM: And again, in Civil Affairs school what were you told in terms of the rules of engagement for you as a district advisor and the units that would be serving within your vicinity?
RB: Not much that would have been helpful if they had. I remember when I got over there the Colonel I worked for that gave me the job as the district senior advisor, he was the [deputy] province senior advisor, he was still basically shell shocked from Tet, he literally was shell shocked. I mean they guy really couldn’t utter five coherent sentences and this was six months after Tet, because the NVA had come right into town and there had been a big fight in Tuy Hoa and everybody was just shocked by it and then his [arms advisor], the major that worked for him was kind of the same way and I remember coming out of his office, I wished I’d have kept my notes, because I really had this very incoherent idea of what it that we were allowed to do, and what we weren’t allowed to do and that was one of the things, you really had to kind of make it up as you went along and kind of hoped that people, that you never did anything wrong. It really was pretty odd. But, yes the rules of engagement were very, very incoherent.
SM: Okay, when you finished your training, you went straight to Vietnam?
RB: Yes.
SM: And I assume you flew in?
RB: Yes.
SM: What was the trip over like, was it all military personnel on your plane?
RB: Yes, I went to Korea, Germany and Vietnam all out of the same gate at the
San Antonio international airport and I went to Korea and Vietnam both through Travis
Air Force base had the same seat at the bar the night before I left in both cases. I’m a
man of regular habits and it was all full of U.S troops and we went over there.

SM: What was the atmosphere on the plane like?

RB: I don’t think it was particularly unusual, it was just a bunch of guys that
were sad to leave home and a, a lot of guys were going back for seconds by the time I
went so, they weren’t too happy.

SM: What did you think about the anti-war movement, as it gained momentum
from ’65 to ’68?

RB: Well I was very unhappy about it, because I really thought they were all wet.
I got to learn a lot more about it after I got back from Vietnam, because we haven’t got to
that part yet, but after I got back from Vietnam, I went to Loyola College in Baltimore,
Maryland to teach ROTC. There’s nothing like being in a big eastern city from 1969-
1972 teaching ROTC. I had some incredibly traumatizing experiences during that period,
just really terrible, but I did learn a lot about that anti-war movement and this very draft
motivated, as soon as the draft lottery was passed, they couldn’t get a crowd and that
helped a lot. And that’s two things I always told my children about the anti-war
movement, very draft motivated, they’ll tell you it isn’t, but it is, and it was also very
anti-military, they’ll tell you it isn’t, but it was and that was very hard to take, really a lot
of people were very insulting, had difficulties in my church and things like that. It was
just very difficult time.

SM: And this is before you went?

RB: No, this is after I got back. Yes, I’m ahead of myself. Before I went to
Vietnam I knew very little about the antiwar movement. We had one bad experience
before we went over, I guess I belonged to a Catholic organization called the Christian
Family movement and we had a convention, at of all places, Notre Dame University, and
we went up from Fort Knox to Notre Dame and a large number of the people, we said we
were from Fort Knox and a large number of the people, just really felt like we were just
dreadful because we were in the Army. This was in 1967 and I thought, but again,
military people are very egotistical and the first thing you think, is why do these people
have their head up their ass, you couldn’t possibly think that they would have a point. So
we knew it was there. Again, I lived on post, at Fort Know everybody lives on post,
nobody lives in town so, we were kind of really insulated.

SM: And before you got on the planes, what did you think the United States was
trying to accomplish in Vietnam?

RB: Get the Vietnamese to fight the war. I think by the middle of ’68 it was
pretty evident, we weren’t going to win it, I had a top-secret clearance, I’d read all the
stuff, we weren’t doing anything up in the highlands. Every time we killed a hundred of
them we were losing fifty of us, and I knew, you asked me what I knew about Asia, I
knew they had a lot more guys. We weren’t going to trade, even at two or three to one,
we’re not going to trade with them for very long and so that, one thing I did know, that I
remember thinking at the time, I read a report one time that MACV said that they had
finished their base building efforts or something, after the first couple of years and that
they anticipated the war lasting eight years or nine years or something like that. I
remember thinking at the time, this was about 1967, that man, I don’t think we can do
that, are the people going to let us do this, because we were getting fifty or sixty people a
week killed then. I said, and MACV is thinking we are going to do this till 1972 or so, I
don’t know. That was prescient, that I really didn’t think that would work, but again I
thought we could figure out how to get the Vietnamese to do this. When Vietnamization
came out while I was over there, that was an excellent, I really thought that was the way
to go, although oddly enough the Vietnamese sure didn’t. The Vietnamese thought the
idea of the Americans leaving was really a dreadful idea; they liked having us there.

SM: Thank you sir, this will end our first interview.

Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Robert
Barron on the 18th of May, 2001 at 2:20 Lubbock time. I am in Lubbock, Texas and Mr.
Barron is in San Antonio, Texas. Sir, why don’t we go ahead and pick up with your
Vietnam experience and if you would, go ahead and briefly discuss the trip over, what the
atmosphere was like, I take it on the aircraft that you were flying over on and then your
first impressions upon landing in Vietnam.

Robert Barron: Okay, well I had gone to a school at Fort Gordon Georgia and
was pretty much motivated toward being a district senior advisor and had tried very hard
to get an advisory job rather than a U.S. unit job because I thought that was the area
where we could influence the action the most and do the most good in Vietnam, so I went
to Travis Air Force Base. I left the San Antonio airport through the same gate that I left
when I went to Korea four years before, sat on the same barstool at the Travis Air Force
Base Officer’s club the night before I left that I had four years before, so a certain amount
of familiarity about going to Vietnam and going to Korea, although I can tell you
Vietnam is a lot farther. The plane was full, and an unusual thing happened in that the
plane broke down and they took all of us off in buses and that was the first time I realized
that something really different was going on because they took us to motels and more or
less had us under a kind of a, we weren’t under guard, but we were sort of secured and
told we couldn’t go any where. We stayed at a relatively nice motel, with about four of
us in each room, and the next morning we went and got back on this commercial plane
and flew off to Bien Hoa, arrived at Bien Hoa in the middle of the night, extremely hot,
had the usual guys getting on the plane, the planes didn’t spend a lot of time on the
ground there and so they were reloading the plane with guys that were going home, and
of course they all went through the You’ll be sorry routine as we left. We got on these
buses with chicken wire on the windows and went from Bien Hoa, to, I’m not real sure
where, I think probably that Army part of Bien Hoa [Long Binh], and stayed in some sort
of a barracks for the night, for the rest of the night and then the next day they bussed us
into the Koepler Compound which is a kind of a legendary place in Cholon in Saigon,
where all the advisors used to go through and then I found out that one of the
disadvantages of being a Captain on the Major’s list as opposed to being a Major was I
didn’t get a very nice place to stay and the Majors did, but what can I say, I was only
twenty-eight years old and just tickled to be, have a commission I think. The heat is one
thing people don’t talk about enough, its really hot in Saigon and of course it was in the
monsoon season, so you occasionally had very strong rain that you could almost set your
watch by. We had some classes there at the Koepler Compound and then we shortly
left, we went on a kind of an odyssey, it was kind of interesting to me how they did that,
they put us on planes, they gave us orders to just go out to the airport and waited until
you get a plane, and we went first I think to Pleiku from Saigon, stayed up in Pleiku for a
day or two and kind of got used to the mountains and so forth and got some briefings in
Pleiku which was the head of the Vietnamese in II Corps were headquartered in Pleiku
and the Americans in II Corps were headquartered in Nha Trang, interestingly enough
and so we went to both Pleiku and Nha Trang, spent a couple of days in each place and I
guess the method in their madness was that we would get used to the climate and the jet
lag and lots of other things as we went along. Pleiku was very different from Nha Trang.
Nha Trang we got to go swimming on the beach, eat lobster at the Fregate hotel, the
Fregate had been hit pretty hard during Tet, which has only been six months before this
so you could still see all the bullet holes in the walls, but it was still the best French
restaurant in Nha Trang, and they also some rooms so we were very fortunate to get to
stay there, as opposed to a military BOQ. I still remember distinctly seeing a couple of
old French planters, sitting in the bar, kind of laughing at us in our new fatigues. Then
we left Nha Trang and went to Qui Nhon which is ARVN 22nd Division headquarters, the
district and province that I was going to were sort of [parts of the 22nd Division] the,
province chief and the district chief were all members of the 22nd ARVN Division. This
is all part of the arcane Vietnamese political system in which everybody had patronage
and so forth. I guess if you understand Chicago politics you can understand Vietnamese
politics and these guys were all sort of patrons of the 22nd Division. We didn’t stay in
Qui Nhon long, and then finally we wound up in Tuy Hoa, they kind of dumped us over
at the 47th Regiment headquarters, which is, a subordinate unit of the 22nd Division and
then they sent a Jeep and took us over to the beach compound in Tuy Hoa and I was to be
the district senior advisor for Tuy Hoa district, which is one of six districts in Phu Yen
province, advisor team 28, and again found that they weren’t too excited about the fact
that I was only a captain and they were looking for a Major and I had to explain to them
that I was on the list for Major and that I would get promoted and this couldn’t help
because I was put in the barracks with a couple of Lieutenants which didn’t work out too
well because I was being a district senior advisor and I was running around advising a
Vietnamese captain who really didn't like the idea that his counterpart was a Captain and
not a Major and so, a lot of Army stuff. I did get to meet everybody on the province
team, which were kind of interesting. The guy I was replacing was a little bit eccentric,
he was an older Major, a mustang, and he didn’t really want to go home. It seemed like
he wasn’t in any hurry to leave and I really thought that was odd, because they way it
worked with advisors, if your replacement was there, you were out of there, you could go
home, which a year later I certainly did. But he didn’t particularly want to leave and so I
sort of hung around the operations office for a couple of days, the operations advisor and
the province senior advisor had both been through Tet in January which had been six
months before and to put as nice a face on it as I could, they were both essentially shell
shocked, the old World War I expression, shell shocked, a good deal of what they said
didn’t make a whole lot of sense to me. This was a little frightening because the province
senior advisor was my boss and he was giving me guidance on what he wanted me to do
as a district senior advisor and I didn’t know what the hell this guy was talking about, so
that gave me some sense of pause. I talked to my predecessor and he sort of cleared
things up a little bit. My deputy, in the integrated MAC CORRDS system, my deputy
was a State Department Officer, and his name was Ellis Wisner and he was pretty
knowledgeable guy who spoke Vietnamese and pretty much roamed around. We got
along very well and he was extremely helpful. I think I mentioned that his father, Frank
Wisner was one of the people who founded the modern CIA after World War II and Ellis
and his brother and sister all served in Vietnam, as civilians, not as military people, so
Ellis was quite helpful and the other people on the district team were pretty competent
people and they had all been there a while and all seemed to knew what was going on.
My counterpart was an old Foreign Legion paratrooper who had been there an awfully
long time, extremely politically well connected, came from the North, was a Catholic and
parents lived in Saigon and I later found that they really didn’t like the idea of him being
up in II Corps messing around, but he said they could have easily gotten him a job in
Saigon, working in an office, but he said he felt like he wanted to do something different
in the war effort. The Vietnamese didn't really have to fight, but if they didn't have
anything better to do, they didn’t mind fighting. So we proceeded with trying to help the
Vietnamese with what they were doing, because of the problems with Tet, prior to Tet, in
January of ’68 the VC had never come into the cities of II Corps, which are of course
mostly on the coast or, with the exception of Pleiku and Dalat [Kontum] and a few like
that, but it was really sort of amazing the way the story was told to me, they just sort of
walked in to the city one night at dusk and nobody knew who these guys were and it was
just a complete surprise, there was a huge fight right in downtown Tuy Hoa, you could
see where a lot of buildings had been blown up and it just had an enormous psychological
effect on both the Vietnamese and the Americans, like I said, the American advisors were
basically shell shocked. The Vietnamese weren’t really shell shocked but they were
certainly looking at things a different way, but one thing that was advantageous was the
VC were all killed at Tet and so the only enemy we had to fool with were the North
Vietnamese and the North Vietnamese had by no means the influence among the
populace that the VC used to have and so it was, in many respects, much easier to fight
the North Vietnamese than the VC. So we progressed to fight the war. One of the things
that I did, that I insisted on with my counterpart was to always be on the ground during
operations. Apparently my predecessor liked to put my counterpart, which name was
Nguyen Thai Lum in an airplane and they’d fly over all these RF companies while they
were out doing stuff [on operations] and just sort of sit in the airplane all afternoon. I
don’t like that, didn't like it then, don’t like it now, you can’t really figure out what is
going on unless you are on the ground so I insisted that we always accompany somebody
on the ground, then you have the time-distance factors in your head a little bit better and
with modern communication, you could put an airplane up there as a radio relay, and
you’re doing just as well. Anyway, and Dai Uy Lam was pretty responsive to that, which
kind of surprised because that was a fairly major change in the way we operated, but he
was willing to do that.

SM: Can I interrupt and ask some questions real quick?

RB: Oh, please do.

SM: Okay, first when you arrived, what kind of briefings did you receive those
first few days about the country, interactions, rules of engagement, things like that?

RB: Mostly what I would consider geographical, one of the things that I really
wanted to know more about was rules of engagement and that was the area were people
were pretty soft, it was pretty hard to tell exactly what the deal was with rules of
engagement. They did discuss free fire zones to some extent, but again free fire zones
were a problem because there were always peasants running around in free fire zones and
you didn’t really want to just go shooting them and so it was, no the briefings were
mostly geographical.
SM: Well, that’s an interesting point; some veterans and some people who I’ve
talked to about the war are under the impression that no matter what, if someone was in a
free fire zone, they were enemy, that wasn’t your perspective apparently?
RB: No, I remember, I’ll tell you one story, I was with, one of the guys that I got
to be friendly with was our forward air controller for the province, a guy names Page and
we were up in a little L-19, flying around one Sunday because he was doing a
reconnaissance and I was in the backseat with an M-79 grenade launcher and he put the
plane in a tight spiral, which would have meant that I was firing the M-79 essentially
down at the bottom of a barrel. It was hard to miss, he said, well those are peasants out
there, he said, they’re always after me to call in air strikes on these peasants, what do you
think? And I said no, I’m not going to shoot the guy he’s obviously not a combatant and
that was just my perspective on it. I don’t think that a free fire zone absolves you from
the need to use common sense and I guess, basic human principles. And at two hundred
feet you can tell whether somebody’s a peasant or a combatant, just because they’re in a
free fire zone, that doesn’t mean a lot to me.

SM: Well, this is kind of jumping ahead a little bit, but based on your experience
and based on what you just said, with the recent issues that the Bob Kerrey incident has
raised and the Kerrey’s Raiders, have you had any particular thoughts on that yourself?
RB: Well, quite a few. In fact I had an interesting discussion on the airplane
between Lubbock and Dallas with the head of the Special Forces Association, we
chanced to be sitting next to each other and so we had an interesting dialogue on the
subject of the Phoenix program, and he’s very pro-Phoenix and I’m somewhat anti-
Phoenix. Kerrey’s mission was a classic Phoenix operation, let me explain what the
Phoenix program is I guess, I’m sure you knew what it is, but for the purposes of the
tape. Phoenix was a CIA program in which intelligence would be processed to determine
the Vietcong infrastructure members, the people who were sort of the shadow
government run by the Vietcong in the hamlets and villages and they would go out to
capture them and bring them in, and I became very anti-Pheonix, because the people the
CIA hired in our district to go out and do this were members of what was called a
provincial reconnaissance unit, and they were basically just the Vietnamese equivalent of
thugs, and they would simply go out and kill these guys because it was easier to kill them
then it was to take them prisoner and bring them back. So I had many, many, many
discussions with the CIA because they wanted me to authorize these operations and I
would not authorize them, so they would have to do it on their own initiative, which they
didn't like to do. They wanted to get MACV involved, I’m not sure exactly why, but I’m
sure there’s some good bureaucratic reason for that. I had been in Vietnam six or eight
months by then and I had pretty good feel for what was a war crime and what wasn’t and
even with very fuzzy rules of engagement, I knew that that was probably pretty, not such
a good idea. Bob Kerrey hadn’t been in Vietnam very long, I think he got had. There is
no doubt in my mind that that SEAL team went out there to kill everybody in that village
because the district chief wanted everybody in that village killed and, in my opinion the
chief petty officer’s telling the truth and Kerrey and the other five are covering it up
because that’s kind of the way Phoenix operated. In the cold, clear reality of 2001, it
sounds kind of amazing, but that’s kind of the way the program operated and people like
William Colby went to his grave saying it was a very successful program and that guy
who’s the head of the Special Forces Association that I talked to on the plane, said it was
a very successful program, but I just think if that was what we had to do to win the war,
then maybe we shouldn’t have been there.

SM: Okay, well your interactions, you kept on using the collective pronoun, that
is we and us when you were talking your movement from Saigon eventually to Tuy Hoa,
was it a group you were with that was doing this?

RB: Well, a small group, a small, somewhat ever changing group, I guess
because we were part of the replacement stream so we were moving in a group, I’d say
no more than three or four and I guess some people stopped in Pleiku and went off in
other directions and then some people stopped in Nha Trang and the group kept getting
smaller until when we got off in Tuy Hoa I was the only one.

SM: So, you were the only replacement coming in at that particular moment?

RB: Well, yes at that particular helicopter, yes.

SM: What were your impressions of the Vietnamese people that you were
meeting with and interacting with those first few days?

RB: Well, pretty good at first because they look real good, they tend to look very
military, albeit somewhat small, but my counterpart was five feet tall and a hundred
pounds, but they had been at it a long time and I think we’d certainly been briefed that
they would know more about what was going on than we did, because they weren’t going
home after a year, but then, it didn’t take really very long to catch on to the fact that there
was a good deal of corruption. The deputy province senior advisor was a schoolteacher,
and ARVN Lieutenant Colonel and I remember him conducting black market activities in
the operations office at the province headquarters when I was working there, so that was
within the first couple of weeks I was in Vietnam, and I was kind of taken with that, and
then Ellis Wisner, this deputy who I thought knew an awful lot about what was going on
and who spoke Vietnamese indicated the level of corruption was pretty high. BU again,
they also had a pretty high opinion of Dai Uy Lam, who was my counterpart and he
actually, as the Vietnamese went, did quite a bit of fighting and so we were fairly well
involved but like I mentioned that there was an ARVN regiment, the 47th ARVN
regiment was in Tuy Hoa, and to the best of my knowledge they never fought anybody
during the year I was there, they literally never did anything. So you have to figure that
something’s wrong, in the middle of the war in which there are a quite a few casualties,
I’m fairly certain that the 47th ARVN regiment never lost an officer, they never had an
officer casualty during the year I was there, which is just astonishing. Unfortunately they
also participated in Lam Son 719 [into Laos], so the 47th ARVN regiment ceased to exist
several years later, which is too bad.

SM: Now, I’m sorry go ahead.

RB: No, that’s all I had on that point.

SM: You were going to say because . . .

RB: Because I liked the officers in the 47th ARVN regiment, they seemed like
nice guys, but everybody all had the side, they all talked a good game, they were all
going to fight, boy if we could just find the enemy we'd sure fight. Its all a matter of
intelligence or its all al matter of this, that, and the other thing and in the meantime,
another week went by and nothing happened.

SM: Well, I’m curious when you first arrived there, at Tuy Hoa, what kind of
briefings did you receive there in a little bit more detail? You mentioned that you did
meet the provincial advisory team and that kind of stuff, did you actually get any kind of
formal briefing?
RB: Yes, I sat down with the province senior advisor and he told me a bunch of things about what was going on and like I said, it tended to be somewhat incoherent, I really didn’t, I asked a bunch of questions and after I got through with him, I just felt like, well he’s not answering my questions, he doesn’t seem to be addressing the problems that I’m interested in addressing, I’ll just ask somebody else, and so I went back over and talked to the operations advisor and found out much the same situation, all they wanted to talk about was Tet of ’68 and I Really wanted to talk about, more like August of ’68.

SM: Which is when you arrived?

RB: Which is when I was there, what are we doing today and what’s going to keep me and my advisors alive, like for the next three days or something. They weren’t really too coherent, then I met this guy I was replacing and he was kind of weird too, then finally Ellis Wisner like I say, this well connected State Department guy, kind of took me in hand and said, look this is what’s really going on. I think I was able to grasp things then.

SM: Well, you said that you spent some time at the Koeppler Compound?

RB: Yes, that’s it. That’s just where all the replacements for MACV went as they came into Vietnam. At that time, I guess procedures changed over the months and years, but it was an old compound in Cholon, which is the Chinese section of Saigon and an old hotel.

SM: What about briefings there was there anything noteworthy you were told?

RB: No, everything was geographical. You’re in Vietnam and this place is full of Vietnamese and its real hot and that kind of thing.

SM: Things that you probably knew before you left.

RB: Yes, I don’t remember anything – the only nice thing was in Nha Trang where the into briefing lasted ten minutes, the guy said, hey you aren’t leaving for two days, you guys ought to hit the beach and have some lobster. I could understand that, that made sense.

SM: What kind of lobsters were they? Did they have claws or were they the clawless lobsters?

RB: They had claws.
SM: When you did get into the role and into your position as an advisor, what were the more interesting initial experiences, your initial interactions with your Vietnamese counterparts?

RB: Well, they tell you in school to try and build rapport, whatever that means and so, he was a family man and I was a family man, we tried to work on that. I spent an awful lot of time with him, which was kind of time consuming because by definition, but I didn't understand a lot of what was going on, I had an interpreter with me all the time, but the interpreter knew what was good for him and didn’t always interpret everything Dai Uy Lam was saying, and the interpreter was an ARVN guy, not an American guy and he didn’t want to go off to the ARVN infantry he liked being an interpreter so he was careful about – so when Dy Wi Lam would be doing his district chief stuff which is a lot of political stuff he wouldn't always tell me what was going on. If Ellis was with me, Ellis would know what was going and he’d tell me what was going on, but the main thing you have to do with the Vietnamese, at least with the conventional wisdom was spend a lot of time with them, which is what we did basically. After Tet he spent every night at the sub-sector headquarters, which is on the east side of Tuy Hoa, the opposite side of the city from where the province headquarters was and it was kind of a bunkered place and we spent the night there and we spent a lot of time just sitting around the bunker shooting the breeze about one thing or another and that kind of helped.

SM: Now this was Tet ’69?

RB: No, Tet ’68 was when they had the big problem and this was August of ’68.

SM: I’m sorry I thought you said after Tet he would do this or you would do it together.

RB: Yes.

SM: He started that way.

RB: Yes, he was held responsible for, I think I told you the VC just sort of walked into the city and because they had no defenses on that side of the city, well they put a sub-sector headquarters out there to control the defenses so even though the VC were all dead and they couldn’t possibly do this again, boy they were ready if they did.

SM: Just out of curiosity, the issue of your interpreter being careful of what he told you, and then having someone like Ellis Wisner there to basically tell you really
what was going on, can you recall any particular incidents, where what you were being
told by your interpreter was completely out of whack or completely different from what
you later learned, or learned simultaneously from Ellis Wisner, what kind of things was
it?

RB: How much VC influence there was in the hamlets of our district, what we
refer to as the Tuy Hoa valley, the hamlets were all out in this great big valley to the east
of the city and Dai Uy Lam would say, everything's safe, everything's safe, but the Ellis
would say, if you drive out there by yourself, you’re going to have your head handed to
you, so I would ask Dai Uy Lam, I said, do you really think this is safe and Dai Uy Lam
would say something and the interpreter always said oh, yes, completely safe, completely
safe. And I would say, well why don’t we got out there? No, it’s not a good day to go
out there, that kind of thing.

SM: Okay, so basically an admission that it may not be safe. Well, how much of
this was about face, I mean this was his district and so?

RB: Yes, it got to be a real problem later on in my tour. I think I was there form
August of ’68 to August of ’69. Well, during that year, I think primarily because of
pressure on the Ho Chi Minh Trail and the residue from Tet, the enemy, it very much
appeared that we were winning the war, because the enemy activity got really a lot less
and this did not necessarily translate into increased security in the hamlets and we had
these computerized reports that we filled out every month in which we talked about two
things, one was called the HES, Hamlet Evaluation Survey, and one was called the TFES,
the Territorial Forces Evaluation Survey, and we would have to evaluate every unit and
every hamlet once a month and we had quite a few problems later in my tour because I
evaluated the hamlets as not being particularly secure and he lost a lot of face because he
didn’t have the security situation in the district that is boss, the province chief, wanted. I
remember going to a meeting and the province chief just screaming at all the district
chiefs in Vietnamese and he sent, the day he told the district chiefs to go take their
counterparts out to lunch and come back after lunch, after we’ve had a chance to
reevaluate this, and this is after I had been his counterpart for ten months and thought I
knew him, and we sat there are lunch for an hour and didn’t say a word to each other.

SM: He wasn’t very happy?
RB: No and I did him a favor, I went ahead and re-evaluated all the hamlets, because I figured all those computerized reports were bullshit anyway. I had my moment of intellectual honesty. Obviously the hamlets weren’t secure.

SM: Well that says quite a bit about the hamlet evaluations survey. What was your overall, I mean, you had been doing that since you were there, correct, that is evaluating the hamlets?

RB: Yes, that was a McNamara initiative to do all this stuff on a computerized way and the problem is it was sort of like the body count. You got evaluated, if things didn’t get better while you were there, well then you probably didn’t a very good job, but again, it was also a good idea to be honest, so it was kind of a conflict there, same thing with the territorial forces evaluation, the troops are supposed to be getting better, well its hard to say because they never fought anybody much. Well, some of them did, but not very much. They were basically a defensively oriented and during the year, if nobody attacked they didn’t do anything.

SM: Well what were your expectations upon arrival, you said you were motivated, you were excited about going and here you were a young man going off to these exciting things, do you think you were realistically prepared for what you encountered?

RB: Yes, surprisingly so, other than the fact that I couldn’t speak Vietnamese, it’s a tonal language, I could study it for five years and I wouldn't’ speak Vietnamese, but I wished I had, if I could have spoken Vietnamese that would have been about the only thing that would have been helpful, but no I was surprisingly well qualified, particularly since it was basically an infantry job and I’m not an infantrymen, my branch was armor and other than a few initial problems of what I would call time-distance factors (in armored warfare you move a lot faster than you do walking) and I had to get used to the pace of people walking and so I couldn’t tell a company to move, and they would not react as fast as I thought they would react.

SM: And how much of this was, again, how much of what you encountered was a surprise versus expected based on what you’d been taught, you went to the Civil Affairs school, you went through training to help prepare you, did you feel that, for the advisory aspect of your job, you were well enough prepared?
RB: I think so, I really do. I think that the Army knew more about what they were doing than I thought they did. The idea of just taking people from these non-Infantry branches and sending us out there to try and essentially be infantry advisors worked better than I thought it would, because really all they wanted us to do was fire support and logistics and so forth. We weren’t really telling this guy how to fight, although after I’d been there six or eight months I kind of was telling him how it fight, once you kind of got the hang of it.

SM: In terms of your, the guy that you replaced, did it seem like he had a good rapport with your counterpart?

RB: I think so; I think he got along pretty well with him. Dai Uy Lam was pretty easy to get along with.

SM: Well, why don’t you go ahead and discuss the first operation you went on, that is the first time you actually went out to combat and were fired upon, or maybe you weren’t fired upon the first time?

RB: Well, I think the first operation we went on was an air mobile operation and I was, so I went ahead and got the helicopters and we all got on the helicopters and that was the first time I learned that the Vietnamese didn’t do things precisely according to the clock and that’s a problem. In modern warfare you really have to, if something is supposed to happen at 10:30, it really ought to happen at 10:30. In this business, well we’ll get on the helicopters ate 10:45 if everybody is there by 10:45, wasn’t really a particularly good idea and boy I was really sore at the Vietnamese about that, and then I found out that these eighteen year old warrant officer pilots that flew these helicopters couldn’t read maps. I was so used to, in my previous Army experience, the warrant officer helicopter pilots were the best soldiers you’d ever run into, but the Army had become diluted by then with all these high school grad, eighteen year old kids that learned how to fly a helicopter by, if you want this to happen, you push this button and you don’t know why, and by the way map reading is something you can learn, maybe in your spare time, so I wound up having to squat between the pilots and tell them where to go every time, and then the Vietnamese were late, so the first air mobile operation really didn’t work too well, but fortunately we didn't run into any contacts. We landed on top of a hill and then walked down the hill, which I thought was an excellent idea, again it
was pretty hot and fortunately didn’t run into anybody, but it was good practice. We learned how to coordinate the helicopters with the Vietnamese and it was almost like a training exercise for me and my Captain who worked for me, was a pretty good soldier and he was an infantryman, warned me that this might happen and so I was pretty ready for it I guess, but the first air mobile operation went that way. The first time I got shot at I was out with one of the MAT teams, MAT is a Mobile Advisory Team. This was Captain a 1st Lieutenant, and three Sergeants, who were designed to be attached to RF and PF companies and go with them on operations and teach them to improve their training level and I had two of these MAT teams attached to my district team, so I basically had three Captains working for me and I went out with one of these MAT teams and we actually got probed at night and so that was the first time that I got fired at and that kind of heartened me because the Vietnamese didn’t run away. Everybody said the Vietnamese would run away if they got shot at and the fact that they didn’t run away and they returned fire was kind of good and I don’t think anybody was hurt and so it was a good chance to hear the bullets go by your head and get used to it I guess.

SM: When you went on that first operation, the air mobile, was that a joint operation, or was that in concert with other units operation in the same area, or the same vicinity?

RB: No, we just, we had a great big district. We had ten RF companies in the district so we just would take like four of the companies and go out and do something. We were within artillery range and so, and by the time the RF soldiers all had M-16 rifles and M-60 machine guns and had been trained way too much and they were fairly capable of doing things. I think they could have stood up against the NVA although we never actually banged into an NVA unit and during all the operations that I was there, the only NVA we ever fought were basically stragglers or small units that were down trying to steal rice or something. The big operations, where we’d go out into the hills and wander around we never actually made a heavy contact.

SM: What was your primary source of intelligence for your operations?

RB: Informants, the people that lived in the valley came into the city every night for security and they’d hear things and they’d tell people about it. The North Vietnamese are coming down into this hamlet and, that was where we had the most productive
contacts was out in the valley at night, where we’d set up ambushes and they’d come
down to get rice because they were starving to death and they we could ambush them.
But going into the mountains beyond the valley in helicopters and looking for North
Vietnamese units in many respects, I’m delighted we never found some North
Vietnamese units, because [in the valley] we were able to fight them more close in and
more effectively. It was more within our capabilities to do that. We had plenty of fire
support.

SM: Did you start night ambushes right when you arrived, was that already an
ongoing operation?

RB: Oh, they were doing it but I think one thing that helped was that we added
these MAT teams, so we just had tons of advisors, I mean this district had like seventeen
Americans, an awful lot of Americans, plus the district was in the province capitol, so we
had access to a lot of other people and the Vietnamese became a lot more aggressive if
the Americans would go with them, because they knew if the Americans went they could
get medical evacuation and they could get fire support, without any ifs, ands, whats, or
buts, it would happen, and so that made the Vietnamese more willing to go out and do
things like ambushes. Again on the coast we had a ton of fire support. We had the
battleship New Jersey; one night I completely expended a destroyer. We had a destroyer
offshore and the destroyer had to stop halfway through the night and turn around so he
could get bullets, or ammunition out of the other side of the ship, so I can’t even imagine
what that cost. Most of it was illumination rounds to keep the NVA from carrying the
bodies off because we wanted to get the bodies the next morning.

SM: And how well did that work?

RB: It worked.

SM: What was the enemy count the next morning?

RB: I think we had seven or eight of them dead, which for where we were
fighting at that time in the war was a pretty big bite.

SM: Was that the largest body count for operations you conducted?

RB: That I was physically present, yes. Again, I was supposed to be sort of an
administrator [District Senior Advisor]. I don’t think I was supposed to be out there
running around every night.
SM: Were there many American units working in the same area?
RB: No, the American units were other places. The 173rd Brigade was the American unit that more or less had responsibility for Tuy Hoa and they occasionally would run an operation in the far reaches of Tuy Hoa district and they had a tank company, Delta 16, it was a tank company but they had ACAVs, Armored Cavalry Assault Vehicles, instead of tanks, but it was tank company personnel and they would come into the district and they would be available to help us. The only joint operations I ever ran with the Americans were with Delta 16 and they helped us on a couple of pretty big fights. I think it was the six-month anniversary of Tet or the eight-month anniversary, no, I know what it was, it was Tet of ’69. Tet of ’69 the North Vietnamese tried to come in to Tuy Hoa and we had good intelligence we had Delta 16 there and we just had a huge fight that night. Delta 16 helped quite a bit, we went out with them and I think we got a pretty good body count that night. We had spooky gun ships and one of my Captains got a silver star and we had a pretty big fight.

SM: And you were on the ground for this one too?
RB: Oh, yes, pretty close on that one.

SM: Now what kind of personal weapons would you carry on the missions you’d go on?
RB: An M-16, a pistol and a knife. Everybody carried the same three weapons.

SM: And what was the basic load the Vietnamese would carry with them on these missions?
RB: About twenty magazines, they carried all the magazines they could carry. They’d have backpacks full of magazines. They carried a lot of magazines. I carried normally about ten magazines and that was plenty. I always had tracers loaded in my magazines so that I could point out targets. My main job was to point out targets for other people so that always screwed up my rifle.

SM: Well it certainly would make it filthy, so a lot of cleaning. Did you have any problems with your M-16 jamming or anything?
RB: No, although everybody said it would, but even firing all these tracers it never would jam. By the time I got there, it was the M-16A1 and it was kind of a better weapon.
SM: How would you evaluate the different units that you work with, because you said there were ten different Rough Puff units in your area?

RB: I think there were 32 platoons and ten companies, 32 PF platoon and ten companies.

SM: What size element would you typically go out with?

RB: I would normally go with one company at a minimum. Toward the end of my tour I remember one time there was a sniper near the sub-sector headquarters and I took a squad and went to get rid of this sniper, and I got about, where I run around to these sand dunes and I just said this is ridiculous, I’m not going to so this any more and I broke off the engagement, went back to sub-sector, but after you’ve been there awhile you just get ridiculously casual about stuff. The closest call I ever had was in one fight where we were pinned down and the Vietnamese were starting to run away. My counterpart wasn’t there, this was a big mistake to go out with them without my counterpart because his deputy was a real weak guy and I brought the helicopters in straight over our heads, rather than perpendicular in front of us because I was in such a hurry to get some fire support on this hamlet and I nearly got shot by to door gunner on this helicopter so the closest I came to getting shot was friendly fire.

SM: And this was an American helicopter?

RB: Yes, but again if you violate the rules, bad things happen and bringing a helicopter in straight over you into the enemy was not a good idea, because it’s not clear where the edge of the battlefront is. It is better to bring you across in front of you, then they knew what’s under them is the enemy.

SM: That particular operation, you were actually going in against a village?

RB: Well, the village had been taken over by either VC or NVA, I never did figure out which and we were told, the Vietnamese were told to go out there and clear it and so I went with them, but for whatever reason my counterpart wasn’t there that day. I have no idea exactly why, because he had a pretty good attendance record, but I was with the relatively weak Lieutenant, in the Vietnamese system a strong guy is not going to have a strong deputy and so we went out there and I think I had some guys from my MAT team with me and the Vietnamese essentially ran away, so the reason I brought the helicopters in straight overhead, I was really worried about the other Americans, more
than I was about the Vietnamese at that point. I really wanted to get myself and my guys out of there, there were like four Americans out there with these Vietnamese and that was the only time they ever actually ran away and left the advisors laying there. This is an experience that many advisors will tell you about, but this is the only time it ever happened to me.

SM: What happened?
RB: We got enough fire on the hamlet to where we were able to get out of there. We did not get killed.
SM: Well, obviously you didn’t get killed but what happened when you got back, the fact that they had left you there?
RB: Well I was pretty sore about it and Dai Uy Lam got real mad at them about it when he found out about it, but there’s not a whole lot else you could do about it.
SM: And this was a Rough Puff unit?
RB: Yes, well the guy who was leading them was a, I’m not sure what his office was. I think they called it a, it was some sort of an ad hoc headquarters called an RF group headquarters, there were so many Rough Puff companies, or RF companies that they had some sort of a headquarters to manage a group of RF companies, but RF companies were often commanded by 3rd Lieutenants and 2nd Lieutenants, so I’m pretty sure this guy was only a 1st Lieutenant. The Vietnamese did not promote with great abandon.
SM: Well, the soldiers themselves, these were primarily farmers and other people who lived in the area?
RB: Yes, well the RFs and PFs were by definition all from Phu Yen province, so they all lived around there. The PFs in many respects didn’t even leave home. They were basically, many of them just had static defense jobs, that was part of the territorial forces evaluation system flaws. You couldn’t evaluate some of the PF platoons because you couldn’t find them. They’d all have jobs in the daytime and they’d all be guarding this bridge at night, and how the hell would you knew whether they were any good or not, you knew they had guns and that was about it, but they certainly weren’t going to train because they all had jobs in the daytime.
SM: But they were all equipped with U.S. weapons?
RB: Yes, by the time I got there they all had M-16s. Now some of the PFs didn’t, the RFs had M-16s, the PFs; I think some of them still had carbines and M-1s.

SM: And what other supplies did they receive from the U.S. besides the rifles and I take it, their ammunition?

RB: I think that was about it. I don’t know that, directly from the U.S., everything came through the Vietnamese supply channel, which was of course funded by us.

SM: You mentioned that when you first witnessed corruption, it had to do with the black market.

RB: Yes and to some extent I was co-opted by that. We always filled up the Vietnamese Jeeps at our gas pumps and I’m pretty sure they were taking the gas out and selling it and then coming back and getting more gas later, stuff like that, but to some extent you cooperate in the petty graft in an effort to – this nebulous repertoire building in which you might be able to do some good later on, do a small evil in order to perhaps further a greater good, that was the logic anyway. Yes, that and I think there were an awful lot of people paying more or less protection and usual kind of gangster-ism that you would expect, in a society where everybody has a gun, nobody ever gets murdered. There’s no murders, everything was blamed on the VC.

SM: Well, how would protection be paid, to whom and why?

RB: Well, if you wanted to live in a certain place or you didn’t want your son to go off and be in the Army, you could pay the district chief or somebody to make this happen. The biggest thing I think that I would see would be the fake payroll. I just can’t believe that all this money wasn’t flowing into somebody’s pocket because there were nowhere near as many RF and PF soldiers as we were supposed to have. I just don’t think they were really there.

SM: So they had a roster?

RB: Yes, but see we didn’t pay them. Unlike the Special Forces, we weren’t responsible for paying these soldiers, so to us it was something of an academic exercise. It was less than academic if an RF company only had sixty guys and it was supposed to have a hundred, and you were counting on them to go with you some place, well then that
wasn’t too academic, but we weren’t responsible for actually finding these guys and
paying them.

SM: Who paid your counterpart, Dai Uy Lam?
RB: I have no idea; oh you mean who paid him illegally?
SM: Well, who paid his wage, who paid his salary?
RB: Oh, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, I presume.
SM: I didn’t know if that filtered down through like the province chief.
RB: No, I have no idea how he got paid. He had plenty of money, they lived in a
nice house in the center of Tuy Hoa and he had a very nice wife. He had a two year old
daughter who weighed less than my son weighed when he was born, because my son was
born after I was there three months and we converted his weight to kilograms, and he
said, well he’s bigger than Tuy, I said, no kidding.
SM: His two-year-old daughter? How much was that an issue, if it was either
positive or negative, the fact that for a lot of these people, a lot of the soldiers that were
supposed to be operating in this vicinity, they were families, and they were family
members, they weren’t just soldiers, I mean this is the true citizen soldier?
RB: Yes, the ARVN soldiers, they were away from their families and they might
have been from anywhere in Vietnam, but no, the Rough Puffs that we were with all had
their families with them. The RF soldiers were with their families when they weren’t
doing RF stuff, and so it often led to a little confusion.
SM: How did it affect their morale?
RB: I guess I don’t know. I don’t know that they fought any more effectively
because their families were there or not.
SM: Was it possible to ascertain their morale?
RB: Yes, the same way you would with any military unit. You could tell whether
they were happy or sullen. They’re not inscrutable and you could tell if things were
going badly and they weren’t bashful about telling their advisor if something was going
wrong. We haven’t been paid, or our food sucks or, they’ll tell you, and they would use
the advisors as a channel up if they had a complaint to make, but by and large for the
most part they weren’t fighting anybody, they weren’t too unhappy. They were all
getting paid every month, albeit not much and they weren’t doing much for it.
SM: Were those the typical complaints you would hear, was that they hadn’t
been paid yet or their food wasn’t good.

RB: The biggest complaint we had got had to so with U.S. units. They really had
a lot of trouble with the U.S. units. The 173rd soldiers would come into Tuy Hoa or there
was an engineer company that was at our sub-sector compound, an American engineer
company, a construction engineer company, they were working on QL 1, which was the
main highway between Hanoi and Saigon, which ran right through Tuy Hoa, and they
were working on the highway and there was a lot of friction between the U.S. soldiers
and the Vietnamese soldiers and so we would be involved in that all the time. The U.S.
soldiers, by and large couldn’t stand the Vietnamese, if you ever talk to anybody from a
U.S. unit, they basically think the Vietnamese were just no damn good, and unless you
were an advisor you never really knew a Vietnamese, I don’t know how they would
know, but if you ever talk to anybody from a U.S. unit the couldn’t stand the Vietnamese
and I think it was pretty much vice versa.

SM: Were there disciplinary problems or behavior problems on the part of either
side, when the Americans would come into Tuy Hoa?

RB: Well, sure they would get drunk and raise hell and the Vietnamese didn’t
like it much. As an example I had a Special Forces Sergeant steal my Jeep, toward the
end of my tour and he was drunk and he just driving around in circles with the Jeep and I
had a couple of MPs that were there and they got him and he resisted arrest and I was just
sort of standing there, like a field grade officer is supposed to do, and these MPs were
really having trouble with the Sergeant and so I finally said, well gee, do you guys need
any help and they said they needed some help so I had the exquisite pleasure of knocking
the crap out of this guy.

SM: And what happened to him, do you know?

RB: Beats me, I guess he sobered up some place.

SM: Was there, what was the size of the American advisory staff that you worked
with?

RB: Well, like I said there were seventeen in my district and there were six
districts in the province of which four had advisory teams, two of the districts had Special
Forces teams, which toward the end of my tour were converted to MACV teams, I think.
They talked about that at the symposium and that was a very, very difficult time because
the Special Forces did not want to give up those missions. They very much did not want
to convert those camps to MACV, so there was a real problem and so there was a lot of
animosity between the Special Forces and the advisors, that’s why I had the exquisite
pleasure of clobbering this Sergeant, this is one advisor who can’t say enough bad things
about the Special Forces?

SM: Why?

RB: I think they did very little. They did very little to further the war effort,
[during the time I was there] those camps didn’t really do that much and most of the time
they were just out their scouting and developing intelligence that was kind of obvious
anyway and they had this really, really, what I would call sophisticated support system
where they could get anything they wanted very easily and so it was a very expensive
proposition to keep these camps running and I just think, the cost benefit analysis made
these camps in to a kind of idiotic operation, they just cost way too much for the benefits
they were providing. I think they should have been converted to MACV years earlier.

SM: Well did they actually do a cost-benefit analysis?

RB: Oh, I doubt it. That wouldn’t be like the Army.

SM: No, I was just curious though, since you used that description. Well, this was
your experience there in Tuy Hoa?

RB: Yes, I’m sure there are other places where the Special Forces really did a lot
of [good] things.

SM: Did you hear stories one way or the other, from other advisors and have you
heard stories from other advisors that you had contact with during and after your
experience of the war?

RB: Its kind of a mixed bag. Its often been said that Creighton Abrams didn’t
like the Special Forces and I guess I’m a tanker like Creighton Abrams, I’m not real big
on special units and like was alluded to in one of the symposium topics, the Special
Forces were the Kennedy’s boys and it just went from there. If you actually look at what
they did in Vietnam, you would really wonder about – all that talk about the
Montagnards, and they had a whole symposium on the Montagnard revolt, as a part of
the entire war effort I think that was a footnote to a detail, but to the Special Forces it was
a big deal, I don’t think the Montagnards are that big a deal, but the Montagnards are a
great deal in the American experience in Vietnam because of the Special Force
involvement with the Montagnards, but that’s just my opinion.

SM: Well, you were there so it’s interesting to know that. Well, did you ever run
any joint operations with the Special Forces camps near Tuy Hoa?

RB: No, they were in other districts west of us and we were never – I mean I
went out there a few times and that was about it. I’m trying to think, I do recall one
operation at one camp but I can’t remember what I was doing there or, I just don’t know.
I just remember that they were there and there was shooting and I just don’t know why I
was out there or why the Vietnamese were out there, so I guess we did once. I can’t give
you the details.

SM: Do you recall if you actually made contact?

RB: Well, I think they made contact with us, I don’t think we ever shot back
effectively.

SM: Previously you had mentioned the PRUs, the Provincial Reconnaissance
Units, what kind of interaction did you have with them, how many of them operated in
your area and what was their structure, what was their organization, that type of stuff?

RB: There was only one in our province, there were about anywhere between
eight and ten of them and I never really spoke to them, but the Vietnamese that I served
with, spoke to them and that was the basis for my judgment that they were basically
thugs, or as the Vietnamese called them, torpedoes, an old Chicago gang land term that
they learned from an earlier advisor, and my counterpart is the one that told me they’re
not going to take any prisoners.

SM: Well, who actually was in charge of the PRU itself?

RB: Guys from the CIA, hard to say, they only used first names. They were
Americans, I think; they didn’t wear uniforms so it was hard to tell. I think a lot of them
were in the Army but some of them were not, some of them were in the CIA.

SM: And did you ever interact very much with them, the Americans?

RB: What, the CIA?

SM: Yes, the guys that were running the PRUs on the ground.
RB: Oh, sure we would see them all the time. Again, they would only tell you their first name, but they all lived in a house their in the province compound and again, I think I mentioned that my deputy, Ellis Wisner, his dad had founded the modern CIA so he kind of had entrée, they didn’t like him much because I think he knew too much about the CIA but if he wanted to go in and talk to them he would. I remember him taking me over and introducing me to all these guys, it was kind of awkward because they wouldn’t tell anybody their last names or what they did or anything but I think a lot of them, particularly the ones that were running the Phoenix programs, were just regular Army officers pulled out of the pipeline and put into the Phoenix program. That was the rumor going around anyway, that they were not Special Forces or any particular capability, which leads me to one point that I want to clarify, I think one thing people forget is that between 1965 and ’66 when the Americans first went over there in force, and ’68 and ’69 when I was there, there was an enormous dilution of the talent level. The Special Forces teams that were there in 1965 were nothing like the Special Forces teams that were there in 1969. These were guys who had gone through the school at Fort Bragg and such but that was about it. They were often not too talented and not too experienced, like, if you read anything about this Bob Kerrey thing, everybody on that SEAL team was relatively young and inexperienced because the old NCOs had figured out how to go someplace else and not spent all their time in Vietnam and this was true of the Special Forces also, so when I speak disparagingly of the Special Forces, I’m speaking disparagingly of the Special Forces that I saw in 1969. I’m smart enough to know that the ones that were over there in ’62 and ’63 were certainly nothing like this.

SM: I’m curious what you think in terms of the effect of the rotation system, as it existed, the 365-day rotation system?

RB: Oh, a terrible personnel policy. Like everybody, opinions are like assholes, everybody’s got one, but I didn’t particularly want to go over there for two or three years but I think the rotation system just killed us, that and the ticket punching. All these guys would have to go up there and be a battalion commander for six months and it wasn’t six months and one day, it was six months. I just think that we had to have done something different in the personnel area, maybe something like we did in Korea, where the guys would stay eighteen months or two years and I think ultimately that is what they decided
to do, too little too late. I think they put in a district senior advisor program where they
were going to ask people to be over there for two years and put their wives in a safe
haven or something like that. Much like, people like Abrams and Westmoreland, their
wives were in Bangkok and they went to go see them once a month and you could have
done that with other people too and then kept people over there for longer. But the
rotation program was pretty bad, that combined with the ticket punching just killed us.

SM: To your understanding, was there any record, official record of those guys
that were in the PRUs, I mean who was their evaluator?

RB: Probably the district intelligence operating center, which was run by a
Lieutenant who worked for me, he was trained at Fort Holabind, he was a military
intelligence officer, and he would have developed their missions and given them the
mission and so he would coordinate with the people around the PRUs, which were the
CIA and sent them out on their missions and so since he worked for me and he was
giving them their missions, I guess to me, I was tacitly in charge of this, but having said
that, the CIA wanted more. They wanted written orders with my signature on it, why I
have no idea. I’m sure that by 1969 there was all sorts of bureaucrat further up the line
that liked pieces of paper to move around and they were looking for pieces of paper. I
just know that I did not want to sign these orders, but then I also took no action to stop
the PRUs from going out, so it didn't make a lot of difference one way or the other.

SM: Well you said that the guy you replaced is the one that told you that the
PRUs would take no prisoners.

RB: No, my counterpart told me that.

SM: Oh, I’m sorry, your counterpart told you that the PRUs would take no
prisoners. TO your understanding, were they not targeting legitimate Vietcong
infrastructure?

RB: Yes, they were certainly targeting legitimate Vietcong infrastructure but it
was based upon information developed form informants that may or may not have been
particularly accurate. Somebody in Lubbock, Texas says Steve is a communist and it
might be some guy who got promoted instead of him, or something like that. Well, that
goes into a big hopper and everybody evaluates it and what if Steve’s a real bad guy and
he’s got two or three people that don’t like him, well the Vietnamese are no different,
there’s a lot of them that are kind of curmudgeons that nobody liked and if enough people came in – that was the easiest way to get rid of some neighbor you didn’t like was say he was a communist and the next thing you know, the guy is dead. Again, in a combat zone, nobody ever gets murdered.

SM: Well, did you know if there was an apparatus in place to check and cross check these types of allegations to prevent them?

RB: Well, you’re supposed to bring them back and put them into the judicial system, but the judicial system really didn’t work very well and even assuming that they had come back with a prisoner, which law of average, sometimes I guess they did, then they would put him in the province prison, which was located again, not too far from sub-sector headquarters and people who went into the prison didn’t come out, at least, didn’t come out vertical. So I just didn’t think there was any really good solution to this problem.

SM: About how many missions did the PRUs conduct while you were there?

RB: I couldn’t say. That programs develops towards the end of my tour, so it was three or four months and I think they were working fairly regularly, but I couldn’t say. I guess I just didn’t really, there was a lot of other things going on and I just wasn’t that interested in that among other things.

SM: I’m curious how you were approached about the orders issue, getting your signature on a written order for PRU to go out and do one of these missions.

RB: Well, these CIA guys came into my office and asked me to sign it.

SM: I mean, they just walked in and say hey, would you sign this please?

RB: Yes.

SM: Not necessarily with the please.

RB: Well, no he was a real nice guy. You catch more flies with sugar than you do with vinegar. No, my goodness, again we were in the province capitol so we ran into these guys all the time and they were all hanging out at the – we had both an officer’s club and a USAID club, so there was two different bars that, in a town with only two bars, and then the Koreans ran a bar in town, so you were in one of those three bars you’d run into these guys all the time.
SM: What was your relationship like with them after you refused to sign the
orders?

RB: About the same, I was a field grade officer and they certainly weren’t. I
might have only been twenty-eight years old but I was still a Major and I don’t think too
many people were too mean to Majors.

SM: But these guys wore no rank?

RB: No, I think they had every right to go to my boss and get my boss to get me
to do it, but they declined to do that and usually whenever I told anybody no, and this was
true in twenty-two years in the Army, whenever I told anybody no, I always told them, if
you think I’m doing something that you don’t like, you certainly should talk to my boss.
That’s just kind of the way I always am about things, because I started to feel like I might
have been doing something wrong, but my boss never talked to me about this, so
evidently they either never went to him, or he didn’t want to go to me about it.

SM: Do you remember about with how much frequency, say in a given week
they would go out, was it like once a week or twice a week?

RB: At least twice a week.

SM: It was pretty steady work.

RB: Yes, I think they were doing all right at what they did.

SM: Well, how much of an emphasis was placed on the body count for your
operations, and especially for instance, Dai Uy Lam, how much pressure was put on him
to produce body count by his boss?

RB: Not too much, I think the main thing they were concerned about during the
time I was there was security. If the hamlet was secure, they didn’t really care if anybody
got killed or not, but you had to keep the hamlet secure and if somebody came into the
hamlet at night, you had to make them leave, either make them leave or shoot them and
the bodies were just sort of an incidental part of that. The big deal about body count was
with the American units, I remember listening to the 173rd’s channels and they were very
conscious about that, but we weren’t especially.

SM: Well, I’m curious about the Koreans, you mentioned that the Koreans ran a
bar?
RB: Well, the Koreans were in Hieu Xuong district, which was the district south of mine. The ROKs had a regimen there, the ROKs had actually a division in Vietnam, so there were a lot of Koreans running around Tuy Hoa all the time and somebody opened up a Korean restaurant and bar there, which kind of made my day because I liked Korean food and I like OB Beer, so my whole tour brightened up when that opened and so the Koreans ran a restaurant and bar in Tuy Hoa, and they were kind of a remarkable group. I’d been in Korea four years before and the Koreans that came to Vietnam were like an all star team, they were bigger, smarter, faster, more efficient than any of the ROKs I saw in Korea, it was just like they took the best guy out of every squad and sent him to Vietnam. They were very effective, they did a very good job of what they were doing, but there just weren’t very many of them.

SM: What did you hear of the operations that they conducted around your area?

RB: Well the thing that they did that was very good was they would cordon off an area and nobody could get in or out of the cordon, which was one thing that Americans and Vietnamese just weren’t nearly as good at, if the North Vietnamese were in a hamlet, you would think the easiest thing in the world would be to form a circle around the hamlet and then when they tried to leave the hamlet, just shoot them, but there would always be a hole in the cordon that they would get through, but that didn’t happen with the Koreans, the Koreans were able to get an escape proof cordon around hamlets. And again, the Koreans were pretty hard on the civilians, if the civilians were helping the North Vietnamese; they had little patience with them.

SM: Well, you mention the issue of war crimes earlier, had you heard of any Korean war crimes?

RB: Oh, sure, everybody talked about that. They would basically just kill everybody that was in a hamlet and that would be the end of that. They were pretty hard to get along with.

SM: Well, how were internal discipline issues for the Koreans, did you hear of any particular incidents?

RB: Well, it was considered a privilege to be in a unit in Vietnam and I’m sure that if they did anything wrong they got sent home, but no I don’t know of anything they ever did internally. They did not have advisors, by the way.
SM: They didn’t have advisors?

RB: No, there were no advisors with the Korean units in Vietnam.

SM: That is they did not work at all with the Vietnamese?

RB: No, what I mean is there was no American advisors with the Korean units, like there were American advisors with the ROK units during the Korean war, but they had no advisors so there was no real American channel into what the Koreans were doing.

SM: Also, was there any Vietnamese input or interaction to your knowledge?

RB: Well, I do remember one joint operation we ran with them.

SM: With the Koreans?

RB: Yes, and they were kind of patronizing toward the Vietnamese, probably for good reason. It was very interesting because everybody spoke English, I liked that. I knew more about what was going on when we working with the Koreans, because the Koreans, the Vietnamese and the Americans, we only had one language we could all talk.

SM: Why don’t you go ahead and discuss that operation, what did it involve and how did it go?

RB: It didn’t really amount to much, it was on the, there was a river that was the boundary between our district and the district south of us where the Koreans were and we were doing something on one side of the river, that is a sweep, and the Koreans were doing a sweep on the other side of the river and we had to coordinate fires in case anybody fired across the river and we actually got quite a few, I think we actually took some prisoners that day, because, my speculation is that they were trying to get to the mountains, which you would have to cross the river from the district south of us to get to the mountains, but Dai Uy Lam seemed to think that they didn’t want to be captured by the Koreans. I’m inclined to believe they were just going to the mountains, but at any rate the operations was a success.

SM: And that was the only joint operation you had with the Koreans?

RB: That’s the only time I ever worked with the Koreans.

SM: HOW about other Allied force units, Australians, New Zealanders?

RB: There was an Australian guy that worked for the CIA and I’m not sure exactly what it is that he did, other than be a kind of a pain in the ass, but you think of
Australians as being kind of easy go get along with guys, this is an actual Australian jerk. I don’t know what his deal was, but he id the only Australian I ever saw over there I think.

SM: How was he a jerk?

RB: He just would always be telling people, rather than tell people how to do thing betters, he would just tell people how stupid they were, that kind of thing.

SM: Back to the Korean operation, how well did the Vietnamese and Koreans get along?

RB: Oh, I think okay. I don’t think Dai Uy Lam particularly liked being patronized but he had a great deal of respect for the Koreans and how good they were. I didn’t see any problems with that.

SM: Physically were more like the Americans, right, in terms of their size?

RB: Well, it’s kind of funny. The Koreans were much bigger than the Vietnamese, but they were also much bigger than the Koreans I remembered from Korea, which goes back to my concept that this was an all-star team. These guys were bigger than most of the Koreans I remember, but they were a lot closer in size to the Americans.

SM: Did you ever have cause to provide any kind of fire support to the Koreans that were that were making heavy contact or anything?

RB: No, again they were in a district south of us and they never ran an operation in our district so I would never have done that.

SM: Well, are there any other missions that were particularly memorable?

RB: Well, I think the last tape I talked about the night that I got mad at the CIA because they didn’t tell us about the – I lost three Americans off a MAT teams, because the North Vietnamese attacked and the attack was designed to coincide with the demonstration in the United States and they were trying to maximize U.S. casualties, so this was very uncharacteristic of July of 1969, when the North Vietnamese were giving up a lot of casualties, in order to inflict three casualties on the Americans and the CIA knew this was going to happen and didn't tell us about it, and I got quite annoyed about that, because I never would have left a MAT team out of the field with an RF company if I thought that was going to happen. In a determined North Vietnamese attack, there was
just no way they would have held, and they didn’t hold; they lost half the hill and they
attacked the half of the hill where the Americans were.

SM: So all the Americans were killed?

RB: Yes, which was kind of the low point in my tour in Vietnam.

SM: Well, when you say the CIA knew, are you talking about the guys there at
the compound?

SM: Well, yes they told us a day or two later, I think one of them told me that, he
told me why it happened, I was very concerned. I said, this didn’t make any sense, why
the hell are they doing this, they lost like thirty soldiers, the North Vietnamese at this
point were kind of fading into the woodwork. By July of ’69 in Tuy Hoa district or Phu
Yen province, we were winning the war. The North Vietnamese were way back up in the
hills unless they came down to steal rice, and here they came to a hill that was almost all
they way down to the coast, which was a long march where they might have been
detected and come under fire and attack this hill, what the hell are they doing. The CIA
guy was a guy names Gary Chow, a Chinese American, told me that they, well they’re
trying to build up casualties because of this demonstration, and I said really, you think
so. He said, I don’t think so, I know so. I just went ballistic when I found out they knew
this stuff. I said, well why don’t you like tell us stuff and they sort of hemmed and
hawed about it, but they did know about it and that really annoyed me.

SM: And that was Gary Chow?

RB: Yes.

SM: C-H-O-W?

RB: No, I couldn’t tell you how to spell it, probably C-H-A-O.

SM: Okay, that makes sense for the Chinese spelling. All right, any other
particular operations?

SM: One time we had a destroyer supporting us, we had a destroyer supporting
us pretty often and we had, they came ashore one day in a whaleboat just to meet us,
which I though was friendly and then we were going to go back out to the destroyer
because they actually had a movie that we hadn’t seen and the guy standing next to me
was the executive officer of the ship, and he slipped and his leg was cut off by the
propeller of the whaleboat and that probably one of the more, they saved him, saved his
life and he actually remained on active duty and that was a memorable time in Vietnam. He was from San Antonio, same as me, and a Trinity University graduate and I remember seeing a picture up in the paper six or eight years later where he was on the bridge of a ship with an artificial leg so everything did turn out okay for him, but that was kind of a harrowing day.

SM: Were there recreational activities readily available for you and the other advisors that is movies, books, newspapers?

RB: No, not really, not unless we got it sent from home. There were a lot of advisors there, but there certainly were not facilities of any sort. Now there was an air base, Tuy Hoa air base, that was an Air Force installation maybe ten miles south of us, and we could go there and they had everything, in fact sometimes we would go there, just sort of like a little R & R, where you would go and get a steak dinner on Saturday night and they had air conditioned BOQs that you could get, because they had a rule that the flight crews had to have air conditioning and so you could get an air conditioned BOQ and sleep under an air conditioner for the night and then come back the next day, so we could do that. But by and large, we had two or three clubs to go to at night and movies; I’m trying to think if we had movies, I don’t recall any movies very often. No, I guess I didn’t see any movies, don’t have any recollection of it.

SM: How about USO shows?

RB: No, they wouldn't have come where we were, not with advisors. There just weren’t enough Americans; with no U.S. units around we were just sort of on our own. When it was time for R & R I had to go up to Pleiku and get my orders. We were administratively at the bottom of a long chain.

SM: Where did you go on R & R?

RB: I went to Honolulu, met my wife and my son. I had never seen my son before. My son was born three months into my tour over there, in fact we were giving a briefing, once a month we had this thing where all the district senior advisors, we had to brief the province senior advisor on what was going on, so it was kind of a big dog and pony show. They had gotten word that my son was born and the guy walked up to me right before the briefing, in an effort to try and rattle me, by telling me my son was born
but I had more focus than that, so I fooled him by being able to give the briefing
perfectly.

SM: But you were surprised?
RB: Well, no I knew he was expected momentarily.
SM: Well, I mean you knew your wife was going to have a baby, but that was
news to me, that she actually had the baby.
RB: It was news that it actually happened; it was a little bit overdue. There was a
mobile army surgical hospital, again, not far from this air base and so I went down there
and called her on the phone, which was hard to do in those days.
SM: What was it at the MASH unit that allowed you to do it?
RB: They had a MARS station. They had volunteers that would patch the phone
calls through, kind of a primitive form of communication but you could actually hear
people on the other end, so that was a plus.
SM: How long did you stay in Hawaii for R & R?
RB: One week.
SM: And at what point did that occur in your tour?
RB: Oh, you had to be there six months and so I guess, it had to have been seven
or eight months, something like that. Let’s see Rob was born in November and he was
about five months old, so it would have been about March or April I think.
SM: Of ’69.
RB: Yes.
SM: What was Tet of ’69 like?
RB: Well, we had a big fight. I don’t know about other province capitol, but we
had a pretty good-sized fight, because I think they were just trying to commemorate it. I
don’t think they had enough force to get back into Tuy Hoa like they did before, but
maybe they thought they did, but we were able to stop them. We were ready for them
and had quite a bit of firepower. The big thing they had in Tet of ’68 was surprise, what
everybody told me was they just walked into town, sort of like, the guards are sitting
there looking at them, well, who are these guys, geez, they’re all military age, where are
they coming from, very strange. It’s a good military lesson, if you do something that’s
totally unexpected, people won’t expect it.
SM: But they of course were expecting it in ’69?

RB: Oh, sure by ’69 it was a different war. Everybody was, the cities were no
longer considered kind of Kings X like they were in ’68. I think that was the big problem
was that everybody figured the cities were off limits to the war. If you were in Nha
Trang or Qui Nhon or even Tuy Hoa, the war was over, you left the war at the village
gate, sort of and that all ended in Tet of ’68.

SM: What kind of civic action did you assist with while you were a district chief
advisor?

RB: Oh, we had tons of medcaps, what are called, where you go out to the
villages and try and provide medical services to the people. There were three medics,
one on each MAT team and one on the district team, so we had more medics than we
knew what to do with and that was what they basically did, and of course we were
continuously building stuff because again, the cycle of the war, the heavy fighting in ’67
had subsided, then Tet came along and there was heavy fighting and then the war
subsided after that, so people were gradually re-occupying all these hamlets that they had
abandoned and of course the hamlets had been flattened by the war, so there were plenty
of things to build, so we were constantly building stuff, schools, little public facilities,
digging wells. I said there was a construction engineer company that we had there in the
compound, we sent them out to build bridges occasionally, so we did quite a bit of that.

SM: Did you have a budget that you worked with exclusively, that you could use
for those types of building projects?

RB: How did that work? Not really, I think we would simply go to province and
ask them if they would do it. I think all the budgeting took place at province level. We
certainly didn’t at the district level. We had two of what we called imprest funds, one
was to use by the intelligence officers to pay informants and then we had another pile –
had it on two shelves in the safe, we had one pile of money we used to pay informants
and another that we used to fix flat tires on the Jeeps and an imprest fund meant you turn
in the receipts and they give you some more money, so those are the only two funds that I
think we controlled. I don’t recall anything else, but that was prior to my MBA in
Carnation. I didn’t do too much managing over there.

SM: Was this in piasters?
RB: Yes, the imprest funds were in piasters.

SM: And the fund that was used to pay informants, again the informant activity, how much intimate knowledge did you have with that activity or did you just leave it up to that Intel office?

RB: I pretty much left it up to the Intel officer. I had a pretty full plate just doing what I was doing and this was a pretty big operation and you kind of had to delegate things.

SM: How many losses did the units, the regional/popular force units and the advisory teams, you already mentioned the three members that were killed on the assault?

RB: That’s the only three advisors I lost. The Vietnamese would lose people periodically, but I think we gave as good as we got in most of the engagements. I don’t think there were any really big disasters while I was there.

SM: How much would the province senior advisor, how much would he come down, or other members of the province team come down and see how you’re doing, offer help, that kind of stuff?

RB: Not really a whole lot. This first province senior advisor, the one I think I told you was shell shocked, he went home fairly shortly after I got there and the guy who replaced him was a, well he was the Lieutenant Colonel and he was my military supervisor and then there was a foreign service officer who was kind of my civilian supervisor and the civilian was the province senior advisor and the military guy was the deputy province senior advisor and so I really reported to both of them, depending on what the subject was, and they didn’t really interfere too much. I think the biggest problem I had with the province senior advisor was he thought I drove too fast. One time I gave him a ride form sub-sector to province, which meant going across Tuy Hoa city and I was driving too fast and he got real mad at me about that. So in a world where there was a whole lot going on, that was the one thing he didn’t like. And then I think he had a stunt to prove how secure things were getting toward the end of my tour. He was foreign service officer 2, which is a pretty high-ranking State Department guy, a fellow named Jim Engel. He went out and spent the night in a hamlet which was pretty far out in the valley and of course we were all atwit about that, because you knew the North Vietnamese would learn about that, how were we going to secure Mr. Engel, so we had, I
think everybody on the advisory team was in that hamlet that night, and every
Vietnamese we could get Dai Uy Lam to give us and the next morning we got up and I
think one of my Sergeants and I bought a Budweiser beer from a vendor, there was
always hot Budweiser beer available and every time there were and Americans around.
We were sitting there eating a C-ration and drinking a hot Budweiser beer and I think he
didn’t really approve of that too much. So he was a little bit stodgy, but the military guy
was okay. He, I don’t know how much he really had to do with much of anything, except
pushing paper, I don’t think he went out very much but the few times he did he seemed
happy enough with what we were doing.

SM: How about other agencies, USAID, for example, did they ever come into
Tuy Hoa?

RB: Well, all these State Department guys were essentially seconded to the
USAID. The USAID guys were called Foreign Service reservists, FSRs, and the State
Department guys were FSOs, but they all basically worked for USAID and I got along
very well with them and they were all over the place. Several of them I thought were
really very amusing guys, because they essentially had joined USAID to beat the draft
and so they managed to beat the draft by going to Vietnam, which I thought, boy what a
concept, but they were, I think more interesting than a lot of the military guys. They
were perhaps more left of center politically, but were there really to help the people and
since I was there to help the people, albeit in a uniformed role, we got along pretty well.

SM: When you met with these kinds of State Department people, how much did
you talk about what was going on in Vietnam, what the United States was trying to
accomplish, whether or not it was working.

RB: Oh, interminably, into the night, until the bottle was empty.

SM: What kinds of conclusions did you draw?

RB: That we might win but the odds were against it I guess, but by the time I left
in August of ’69, it sure seemed like we were winning and nobody could figure out
exactly why, and as it turned out later, it seemed like we were winning because the bad
guys had all underground and made us think we were winning. To our uneducated of
Westerners, boy it sure looked like we’d won the sucker. There’s been a new book that’s
come out, that focuses a lot on the Abrams era in Vietnam, I can’t think of the name of it,
but some guy had access to Abrams papers and so he produced this book, he really feels
like that if we’d have kept the budget up that we might have been able to win. I seriously
doubt that, but I guess you could make that argument. We would have to keep the
bombing on the Ho Chi Minh trail going and stuff like that indefinitely.

SM: So what else, from the time you got there, to the time you left, what were the
biggest changes in your attitudes and perceptions regarding U.S. involvement in
Vietnam?

RB: By the time I left, I didn’t think we could win. All the evidence to the
contrary, I just didn’t think there was much hope, for one thing everything I Had been
able to gather from the papers and everything was, I just didn’t think the American
people were going to let us stay there long enough to win. I had some doubts about that
before I ever went over there. I remember reading some documents, I was at a fairly high
level agency before I went to Vietnam so I was privy to a lot of documents that seem to
indicate that the American Army was planning on staying there an awfully long time and
I remember thinking, about the time of Tet of ’68 that boy, this isn’t going to work, we
just can’t stay here for five more years, people aren’t going to go for this, as it turned out
we did stay there for five more years and people didn’t go for it. I just think the
American people aren’t going to go for anything that takes that long to win, plus I Have a
very jaundiced opinion of the strategy. I think the search and destroy strategy and the
one-year tour and the ticket punching, the whole Westmoreland concept was flawed. I
think maybe if Abrams had had the job from 1965 on, it might have been different. I
think Abrams was a giant to Westmoreland’s pygmy, but you’ll find people who argue
the other side of that.

SM: What about the other operations, the other was, CORRDS for instance, what
did you think of that emphasis, that activity and did you think it was, if we had placed
perhaps more emphasis on that, would that have made a difference?

RB: Well, that’s what I mean. That’s what I alluded to when I said if Abrams
had been the boss instead of Westmoreland because that’s what Abrams would have
done. Abrams was a strong believer that we couldn’t win this war militarily, that we had
to win it through civic action and I think Abrams decisions, if they had been made, and
Abrams made that clear when he took over, if he’d have been doing that three years
earlier, hey, things might have been different, I emphasize might, because you’re still
dealing with the same South Vietnamese corruption. But that would be the difference
that I would cite between the Abrams way of doing things and the Westmoreland way of
doing things.

SM: Well, are there any other operations or missions that you’d like to discuss
concerning your time in Vietnam?

RB: There was one amusing thing that happened that might ought to be part of
the record. I had an officer from the Cold Stream guards show up one day when I was
there, and we spent the entire day surveying places to put the Cold Stream Guards and
I’ve often wondered how close the British were to actually sending a unit over there.
LBJ was trying very hard to get the British to send a unit there so it would look more like
a United Nations effort, and I don’t know if this was just some guy form the embassy in
Saigon that was trying to be ready in case something happened or whether they were
actually ready to go or not, but the Brits did, if the Brits had come to Vietnam, they’d
have been right there. Then maybe we would have a British pub in Tuy Hoa to go with
the Korean restaurant.

SM: I was curious about other strange incidents maybe involving wildlife, stuff
like that; you were on the ground quite a bit.

RB: Yes, I never saw a tiger, I’ve been told a lot of times that tigers were around
and we were in places where they used to go tiger hunting before the war but I think the
tigers had gone deeper into the woods. We did see quite a few of the little Vietnamese
deer running around, and you’d see a lot of places where bananas were growing where
they had, you could tell that there had been a lot of monkeys there, but no not really. I
think the wildlife had pretty well gone further back by the time I got there.

SM: No snake or insect stories?

RB: No, I don’t think I ever saw a snake and I never got bit by any insects that I
can think of.

SM: Except mosquitoes, right?

RB: Oh, well they were everywhere and you had had to be careful about that,
where you stayed at night, but again, we weren’t in swamps much. We were in this big,
when we were out at night we were in this big, like a huge field of farms and the only tree
were right around the hamlets and we’d set up in a graveyard or something like that, there
wouldn’t be a whole lot of activity.

SM: Well, how about food, what did you do primarily for food?
RB: There were so many Americans in Tuy Hoa that they ran what was called a
B Ration mess hall. That’s a mess hall that didn’t have any fresh fruits or vegetables, but
they actually cooked to food. It was kind of like cooked C-rations, so they had pretty
good food. I could eat there any time I was in the province compound and I had a room
at the province compound so I could stay there any time I wanted to and that was another
difficulty that I had with the province senior advisor, because I would spend the night out
at sub-sector and come back in, in the morning and I like to eat breakfast and then go to
bed and he didn’t like me coming to the mess hall without shaving, and I would do it
anyway, because I was only twenty-eight years old and wasn’t very smart so we had
some problems about that. I think it reflected adversely on my efficiency report. Of
course, because I did it all my Captains did it too, so we would all be there eating in an
unshaven state and if we weren’t there we would just eat C-rations, or preferably LRRP
rations, they’re dehydrated, just add water to them.

SM: Now why preferably LRRP?
RB: They tasted better.
SM: Then the C-rations?
RB: Yes.
SM: How about eating on the economy, you mentioned eating at the Korean
restaurant, but what about Vietnamese food?
RB: Well, if we were out with a Vietnamese what we would do is mix C-rations
with rice and just all eat it together. I happened to like rice a whole lot. I liked it before I
went and I still like it and so that’s very helpful if you’re going to live in Asiatic country.
We were very fortunate; because of this B-ration mess hall we didn’t have a whole lot of
food problems. The other district teams on our province had a lot of problems about food,
in fact I think they spent most of their time trying to feed themselves, because food would
be helicoptered out to them, and they would buy some rice and somebody on the team
would have to do nothing but cook, it was just a kind of a nightmare that we were able to
avoid. I’m glad we didn’t have to worry about feeding ourselves. We did have an icebox
and so we had plenty of, we had tons of iceboxes. The American supply system was very
generous. I think we all had iceboxes in our rooms, so we certainly had plenty of cold
sodas and cold beer when we were not out on an operation.

SM: How about fresh fruits and vegetables? You mentioned that the mess hall
couldn’t or didn't get that stuff in, would you buy that stuff on the economy yourselves?

RB: No, I never did. I think other than bananas, they had really good bananas or
French bread on the economy I would do that, but other than bananas or French bread I
don’t have any memory of ever eating any other fruit. Coconuts, but I don’t’ like
coconuts much but we would shoot up into the coconut trees and the coconuts would fall,
but I just don’t like them, but everybody else seemed to like them.

SM: Did you have any gastrointestinal problems?

RB: Well, now one of the things they did was, this sounds medically strange but,
when we went to Fort Gordon to the school before we went over there, they told us to
take antibiotics continuously throughout the entire year we were there, so we took
antibiotics for 365 days. I’ve told doctors this and they’ve just gasped but that’s what the
public health doctor that taught us our class said we should do, just take these antibiotics
continuously and so we did.

SM: What did they give you?

RB: I can’t remember but it was some penicillin derivative and I took it
everyday.

SM: Do you remember?

RB: No, I don’t.

SM: I’ve heard other people say something similar and I’ve also heard people
used the name, bactrim, the antibiotic, bactrim.

RB: No, that doesn’t mean anything to me, but that doesn’t surprise me, I’m not
very good at that sort of thing. The one thing I remember is Darvan, which is a painkiller.
We used that extensively and then there were a lot of amphetamines available. We all
used amphetamines constantly, because hey if you’re only their for a year you might as
well just stay awake. I’m being facetious, but there was kind of some of that going on,
and you really didn’t want to fall asleep sometimes, so it was a good place to be young. I
can’t imagine living like that today.
SM: Well, how would you get the amphetamines?

RB: Oh, everything was available; we had everything, like I said we had three medics. The province medic was a Sergeant 1st Class, he had access to everything.

SM: So you could get speed from the medic?

RB: Of course, you could get morphine form the medic if you wanted it, but there wasn’t anybody doing that.

SM: It was understandable that you would want to keep awake, you would want an amphetamine.

RB: The antibiotics, he had plenty of them, so you just kept taking them and then when I got back from Vietnam I was very susceptible to colds for a couple of years after I got back. I think I must have had four or five colds the first couple of winters I was back. I never used to catch cold all the time and I’ve had doctors tell me, well that doesn’t surprise them. My system was probably all screwed up because of all these antibiotics.

SM: Yes, because it might have suppressed your internal immune system.

RB: I’m sure I did, but I always figured it was the lesser of two evils; you’re constantly eating Vietnamese food, which we really weren’t. I didn’t eat with the Vietnamese that much at all. I would eat with Dai Uy Lam occasionally but not very often.

SM: When you did eat Vietnamese food, did you have anything, which was really strange?

RB: Well, no I don’t think anybody had, not to be too indelicate but I don’t think anybody ever had a formed bowl movement in Vietnam, everybody more or less had the runs the whole time they were there and that was just sort of a normal part of living in a tropical environment I think.

SM: In terms of the Vietnamese food, did you have like the half-hatched duck or the duck eggs?

RB: No, I didn’t want to eat that stuff. We’d have it but I’m not one to eat something I’m not sure of just to make my counterpart happy. If that’s what it takes to build rapport than they need to get another guy, but yes, the duck eggs and all that stuff is a fairly normal part of the thing.
SM: Well, is there anything else about your year in Vietnam that you’d like to discuss?

RB: No, I probably rattled on long enough. After I got back, I really didn't want to go again, like I said, my feelings about it, particularly I lost those three advisors like a month before I came home and I was still pretty down about that and I really didn’t want to go back and as it turned out I didn't have to go back and so I was happy with that arrangement.

SM: What kind of interaction did you have with people at home, your wife, your parents, that kind of thing?

RB: Well, we went to Baltimore, Maryland for three years to teach ROTC after I got back and that was really dreadful because people in the heartland didn’t really understand that on these big eastern and western cities, just how intense the anti-war movement was, and people really hated us. I really had some terrible experiences when I got back and I really wasn’t prepared for it at all, I was just taken aback, it was like somebody hit me in the stomach on a couple occasions. You don’t know what to make of it. I remember one day I went out to a high school – a normal part of college ROTC is to go out to high schools and present, this is what the military is like – I was met by a group, this was a private high school in Baltimore, I was met by a delegation of teachers, these were students, there were teachers who just really told me I wasn’t welcome on the campus and I was just a dreadful sort of person that shouldn’t be there. We had our healthcare for my wife and baby was at the public health hospital in Baltimore, which is adjacent to the John Hopkins campus and I know one time my wife’s car was blocked when she needed to get my son to the doctor and the guys that were doctors there were all avoiding the draft by working for the public health service, so that’s a kind of a difficult situation when you’re getting your medical care from people that loathe and despise you. We were very fortunate, we could wear our uniform, most of the Washington and New York ROTC detachments, they really didn’t wear uniforms, because things were so bad that wearing a uniform would just cause problems, but that turned out to be kind of a long three years.

SM: Before you came back, while you were in Vietnam, did your parents and did your wife write about these types of issues?
RB: Not even a little bit. No, because they were in Texas, none of this was going, San Antonio, Texas, military USA, you think anybody, I mean if they had an anti-war demonstration here there would be twenty people doing it. There's no comparison.

SM: Well, what was the trip like going form Vietnam to the United States for you?

RB: Real good, well my wife got somebody to watch Rob and I met her in San Francisco and we had a delightful week in San Francisco. That was the first time I’d ever been to San Francisco and actually toured it so I enjoyed it immensely and then we flew back to the States and had thirty days leave and went to Baltimore.

SM: When you got to San Francisco, what was the reception like there, in terms of was there any anti-war protests or anything like that going on?

RB: Well, the only bad problem I had was when we went to the hotel, I think we were at the St. Francis hotel and the bellboy made some remark about Vietnam and I reached back with both hands, looking for either my pistol or my knife, which would be my right hand or my left hand. At that time I thought man, I have got to figure out another way to solve problems, but that really scared me, because when he made a remark like that, well I just thought, well this is just awful that I reacted that way, I have got to calm down, but see that’s part of the problem, you’re in a combat zone one day and you’re in San Francisco the next. I’ve heard many stories from people about that, you’re really going from one environment to the other and it’s somewhat difficult to do that, but in San Francisco that was the only thing that happened I think.

SM: Do you remember what he said?

RB: Not really, I guess I blocked it out, it was a remark about my wife, I think that was what made me so mad, something like that why would she would be married to the kind of guy that would go to Vietnam, something like that, and so I didn’t like that. I think most of the time people just ignored you. People would talk about you, not too many people are going to walk up to a 6’3” 200 pound Major and tell him that he’s a war criminal, but people will talk about you and make things difficult for you. We would be using the faculty dressing room at the gym at Loyola and people would not want to have a locker near you or stuff like that, that kind of thing, which is pretty subtle. We would go out to dinner or something and of course we all had relatively short haircuts at a time
when nobody else had short haircuts and that was when I knew we were in trouble, because these were middle Americans that were making snotty remarks about us, that you’d overhear. My wife and I are Catholics and we’ve always been involved in activities through our parish church and we were asked to leave one of the activities that we were in, because they just didn’t think we were morally suited for that sort of activity.

SM: Who asked you to leave?

RB: The other people in the group. It was a group called Christian Family Movement, which was kind of a Catholic Outreach group and they just didn’t think that we ought to be involved. These sort of things were a problem for many years. Fortunately in 1972 we got transferred to Fort Hood and boy then you’re really insulated from any anti-war activities.

SM: So from the time you got back in 1969, to 1972 you were on the East Coast/

RB: Yes, I was in Baltimore. It was kind of a lot of tension because if you, you would lose your position on the faculty if you got mad and hollered at anybody or acted out in anyway, so you’re always kind of walking on air. They were basically comping an MBA. I was getting free tuition for an MBA and I didn’t really want to screw that up.

SM: While you were on the East Coast, while you were in Baltimore, did you get any reprieve from that hostility, at least by interaction, I mean, the East Coast, there’s plenty of bases, plenty of military.

RB: Well, when we were in the ROTC department there were five of us, five officers and three Sergeants so we certainly had our own little community there, so we had plenty of social life. It wasn’t like I was out there by myself, and there were three detachments in Baltimore, Johns Hopkins, Morgan State and Loyola.

SM: And the other officers and the ROTC personnel, how many of them were Vietnam veterans?

RB: Oh, all of us, at that time nobody in the Army was not a Vietnam veteran.

SM: What was the most difficult thing for you in terms of your service in Vietnam, what was the most challenging aspect of being in Vietnam?

RB: I guess if I had to summarize it, I was a pretty young guy, I was only twenty-eight years old and it was just an extraordinary amount of responsibility for a twenty-eight year old guy to have. That’s one of the neat things about the Army, they give you a
lot of responsibility and they’ll put you out there and see if you can swim, but we had a
huge district, with about three thousand troops and I had all these Americans working for
me and all these agencies coordinating with me and as I think I’ve tried to make clear, not
a hell of a lot of guidance. You pretty much had to make up your own mind what was
going on here and what you were going to do each day and I think that in summary would
be the most difficult thing about it, was being only twenty-eight years old and having all
that responsibility but again I never felt like the Army didn't equip me to do it. I guess I
did okay. I have no regrets about what I did. I think it was a better place when I left than
it was when I got there and I don’t think I made any dreadful mistakes.

SM: What was the most difficult aspect of transitioning from being in Vietnam to
being back in the U.S.?

RB: You just couldn’t get the war off your mind. My wife talked – In Baltimore
at that time, you could watch ABC, NBC and CBS one right after the other if you could
imagine anything more horrible that watching three, I wouldn’t do that now if somebody
paid me a hundred dollars to do it, but you could watch them one right after the other and
I’d watch the films from the battle front and I just couldn’t get the war out of my mind at
all. That was a problem and I really didn't get over it for a couple of years. No flashbacks
or anything dramatic like that but I was just more or less obsessed about the war,
everything I read was about the war, I had these ideas about the war and I was looking for
books to make me understand more about it and so forth, so I think for about three or four
years there I was pretty boring.

SM: What kind of outlets did you have in terms of discussing the war, could you
discuss it openly with your wife and other family members?

RB: Well, my wife. I don’t think my parents were ever interested in it, but my
wife certainly listened to everything I had to say about it. I think she had to, but I think
that’s one of the most difficult things about the war is that most people that came home
from the war found out that most Americans just were completely indifferent to it. The
opposite of love is not hate, its indifference and I think people just get very, the fact that
everybody was so totally indifferent about the war just sort of amazed me because it was
so important to me, but most Americans just barely knew there was a war in Vietnam.
It’s kind of astonishing because there was an awful lot of people over there. There was a pretty big effort, but most Americans; it just sort of was a detail.

SM: Well, could you discuss with your fellow ROTC officers?

RB: Oh, sure we talked about it plenty. A lot of them were going back. Well, no I guess not, I don’t think anybody left the detachment and went back, but they’d all been there at least once and some of them twice.

SM: What did you think about Nixon’s Vietnamization plan when he implemented that shortly after you got home?

RB: I felt like it was important that we disengage and that sounded like it was as good a way to disengage as any, but we had to disengage and it didn’t much matter to me how we did it, although I did think we could have all just run and got on boats, but we had to figure some sort of a phased way to get the hell out of there. By 1969 it was pretty evident to me that what we were doing wasn’t working so we might as well see if the Vietnamese can do it, and I think there was a certain amount of thinking that maybe if the Americans got out of the way, maybe the Vietnamese would do it, that the Vietnamese were just sort of, the Vietnamese and you’ll hear them tell you this, if the Americans would do it, they’re not going to do it and so I think some of thinking I had was that well, if the Americans get out of the way, maybe, they’ll have to do it and that seemed to be the case, but then they couldn’t do it.

SM: You were there until 1972 and then you went to Fort Hood, what did you do at Fort Hood?

RB: I was a test and evaluation officer at, we basically ran troop tests on things like the M-60A2 tank, the Dragon missile system and like that, because I got the MBA I did a lot of statistical analysis.

SM: And you stayed there for how many years?

RB: Four years.

SM: A year after you got there, or shortly after you got out there of course, the Paris Peace Accords were signed, 1973, what did you think of that?

RB: It sounded to me like we had a shot, that was basically all it was, was a shot, that maybe the Vietnamese would rise to the occasion and maybe the wouldn't and apparently they didn’t.
SM: Then of course, that’s what happened in 75, April of ’75.

RB: I was very unhappy. April of ’75, I just hate that, the pictures of that helicopter leaving the CIA building, I just hate that. I still feel badly about how things turned out, but I just don’t know how we could have got, as the advisor, I just don’t know how we could have done more for the Vietnamese. Maybe a joint command would have worked, but again the Vietnamese sensibilities wouldn’t have stood for a joint command. I just don’t know, the whole thing might have been hopeless from the get go.

SM: Well, what did you think about Congress’s decision to withhold funding, to continue support for the South Vietnamese government, the South Vietnamese military more specifically?

RB: I didn’t like it at the time and I still think that we could have afforded more. I think we could have, when the North Vietnamese had gone conventional I think we owed it to the South Vietnamese, to at least stop conventional attacks, like we did in 1972. I don’t know that we could have done much about infiltration or anything like that, but a conventional assault by tanks and heavy weapons across the DMZ, I think we had an obligation to do something about that. So, yes that’s the reason for my sadness about the evacuation in ’75 is because I think we should have done more, now we might have had to do it again in ’78 and do it again in ’81 and you know, it would probably be getting old by 2001, but we had to have figured out a better exit strategy than that. But again, Congress is elected by the people, and I think I told you when I was in Baltimore, we had regular middle-class Americans that were pissed off at us about the war. By 1970 or ’71, the middle-class was getting mad at us and once you lose the middle-class in this country, boy, you hang it up.

SM: Do you remember any particular incidents involving what you perceived to be standard middle-class Americans, verbally or however they accosted you?

RB: I told you about the problems I had in my church, that’s certainly that sort of thing, and we’d been eating in restaurants and you’d just hear people whispering.

SM: How were you able, if at all, to integrate your Vietnam experience into your military career, how did it enhance, how did it help you later as an officer?

RB: I don’t think it had much to do with my later, I don’t think I had a whole lot of success. I retired as a Lieutenant Colonel, I only got one more promotion, but I think
that it was just something that everybody in the Officer Corps had and if you hadn’t been
to Vietnam, actually I had a friend in Germany, I was in Germany form ’76 to ’79, I had a
friend in Germany who was not a Vietnam veteran and I don’t think it hurt him much at
all. He was another Major, he was in the Corps of Engineers and he did a pretty good job
at what he did, but for whatever reason, I think he was in Thailand or something, he never
went to Vietnam and it never really hurt him.

SM: When did you retire?
SM: So you were in Germany from ’76 to ’79 you said, what was the atmosphere
like in Germany, because of course this is also a very tumultuous time for the Army?
RB: Oh, it was a mess, very difficult to, by that time the war was over and we
were kind of rebuilding the Army. I think in the early ‘70s the Army in Germany had
basically just gone to pot because they just didn’t have anybody to be in the Army in
Germany, there was no leadership and the place was just a mess, ’76 to ’79 they were
kind of rebuilding it, but it was still a difficult time for the Army. We didn’t have
anything like the logistic support that we needed. I was there for three of the four years
of the Carter Administration and the military was basically just starved. We didn’t have
any money for infrastructure at all.

SM: What about the soldiers, what were the major issues or problems for the
soldiers?
RB: Well, I was the, the biggest problem back then was drugs and integrating
women into the Army. The biggest thing we were working on, that was when the
Women’s Army Corps was abolished and the women were mainstreamed into the Army
and that was a real problem because what do you with all these women that are in the
military. They had been in more or less segregated units where they weren’t in the
mainstream, putting women in the mainstream was a difficult thing to do because, for a
hundred reasons and so that was one of the bigger problems we had.

SM: What kind of issues emerged concerning integrating women into the Army
while you were in Germany?
RB: Well, facilities problems, if they’re going to live in the barracks with the
men, you have to have separate restrooms, there’s of course a great deal of fraternization,
that’s a problem. There was a good deal of perception that they weren’t as capable as
them of getting the job done in units like, most of the units we were with were engineer
units, some were good and some weren’t, most of the women felt like they wouldn’t have
to fight if a war started, that was one of the more scary things to me is they all thought
they were going to be evacuated if a war started. They thought they were going home
with the dependents. I said, hey show me the way the United States runs and maybe you
are, but it was very difficult, and some of the units, like the medical units had like half
women and it would be hard to send half the soldiers in that unit home if a war started.
SM: You mentioned fraternization; did you have any pregnancy issues?
RB: Oh, yes a lot of them were pregnant.
SM: What happened?
RB: Generally speaking they went home.
SM: When you say they went home, do you mean?
RB: Went to the United States.
SM: They were discharged and went home or they?
RB: If they wanted to be discharged, they could be discharged and I think most
of them wanted to be discharged, but I think they got pregnant to get out of the Army in
some cases, but it’s hard to generalize.
SM: But in terms of military policy, U.S. Army policy, they weren’t asked to
leave.
RB: No, heck no in fact all they asked them to do is have some sort of a support
plan. One of my more memorable experiences was one of the engineer units that the
Kaserne where I was had an alert and I was standing out on the street watching them pull
out into the Strasse from the Kaserne and this gal was in this truck and she had her baby
with her in the truck and so I held up my hand and stopped the truck and I said what in
the hell are you doing with that baby. And she said well, my support plan failed.
They’re all supposed to have a support plan, they say somebody was supposed to take
care of their baby if they were to go on an alert and she said the woman who was
supposed to take her baby wasn’t available to do it. I said, well you can’t, you just can’t
take this baby to the alert area, that’s not right again, and so again I was a Major and so
this Captain came along and I told him, look you’re going to have to do something about
this woman. He said well we’ll have to sort it out later and so they took off in the truck
and I was thinking maybe they ought to get a little steel pot [helmet] for the baby or
something. Yes, that was kind of typical of what went on.

SM: Taking the babies to an alert?

RB: Well, you couldn’t leave the baby at home, to me it made sense.

SM: Her choices were AWOL or take the baby with her.

RB: Yes, at least she showed up and was driving the truck, there’s something to
be said for that and she knew it was just an alert so the baby was probably okay out at the
alert area.

SM: Any other interesting issues emerge while you were in Germany?

RB: Just that we didn’t have enough of anything. I was in the logistics area by
then and we were basically dividing up shortages and so that’s my biggest memory about
Germany is there wasn’t enough of anything. There weren’t enough school buses, there
weren’t enough PX’s, there weren’t enough commissary items, everybody was having a
tough time.

SM: Did you ever run into those types of problems in Vietnam, shortages of
material that you might need.

RB: No, Vietnam had plenty of everything, everything that we wanted.

SM: What did you do after Germany?

RB: I came back to Fort Hood, back to that same job I had for four years before I
went to Germany, I came back for two more years.

SM: And at this time, the atmosphere, well at Fort Hood it had always been very
conservative, pro-military?

RB: Oh, yes well by that time I was just marking my time to get to 1981 when I
could retire. I had pretty well lost interest in the Army by then and I wanted to get on to
something else. I passed the CPA exam in 1980 and I was ready to move on to my
second career.

SM: Okay, which is what you did.

RB: Yes, I’ve been a CPA since 1984. The only eccentric thing was I retired
from the Army in 1981 and moved to San Antonio, which is where my wife and I are
from and the first night I was in the house we purchased, full of all the household goods
that we had shipped to San Antonio on my retirement orders, the phone rang and it was
my boss saying I had been selected for Lieutenant Colonel and that I had to stay in the
Army two more years in order to retire as a Lieutenant Colonel and I said, hey you don’t
know my wife. I’ve moved her to San Antonio; she isn’t coming back to Fort Hood.
She’s been there six years already, she’s not going to do seven or eight and the General
that I knew there, actually got me moved to San Antonio for the last two years I was in
the Army, so I was able to retire as a Lieutenant Colonel, so I was very fortunate with
that, so that’s why I retired in ’84 instead of ’81.

SM: And then you’ve stayed in San Antonio ever since?
RB: Sure, I’ve been a CPA in San Antonio since 1984.
SM: Has your opinion about the war changed at all since you left the military?
RB: No, not really. I spent an awful lot of time reading and studying about the
war from the time I got home until the time – I think I’ve done everything I can do to find
out about the war and I don’t think I’ve softened my opinion about it. I still think of the
anti-war movement as being very inimical to the effort in Vietnam. I think free speech
and protests can be run into the ground and there is such a thing as supporting your troops
if they’re involved in a war.

SM: What did you take away from your experience that was most important to
you personally?
RB: There was something difficult that had to be done and I didn’t run away
from it. I’m very proud of that. I would hope I’ve been able to pass than along to my
children. Contrary to popular belief, it was a lot easier to not go to the war than it was to
go to the war and I think I have a profound belief that the people who ran away from the
war, at five o’clock in morning when they wake up in the depths of their soul I think they
feel like they did the wrong thing.

SM: What do you think about contemporary, current U.S. policy towards
Vietnam and normalizing relations with Vietnam?
RB: I don’t think there is any problem with that. I think the country, I have
Vietnamese friends here in San Antonio that are wired into their relatives in Vietnam and
of course through the counterparts association and I think its fairly clear that the country
is still being run by a bunch of goddamn thugs out of Hanoi and anybody who invests in
Vietnam is nuts, but if we can normalize relations and figure out some way to get some
money away from those people I have no problem with that.

SM: What do you think we should take away from that experience as a nation?
RB: Be very careful about commitment; be very careful about open-ended
commitment. I think on balance, I was just all a part of the Cold War, if you look at the
big picture it was all a part of the Cold War and maybe the Soviet Union wouldn’t have
failed if we hadn’t fought in Vietnam. Its all a system, the system is interrelated and
somehow I think that standing in Vietnam was important to that, but I don’t know that we
had to stand the way we did or for the same period of time that we did, but we had to
have a commitment to Vietnam and we had to do something in Vietnam. Now whether
what we did in Vietnam or the way we did it is correct I don’t know, but we couldn’t
have ignored Vietnam. I think people who say that Kennedy if he had lived, would have
not committed all those forces to Vietnam are denying the obvious. I think Kennedy
would have sent the same people there that Johnson did.

SM: Well is there anything else you would like to discuss?
RB: No, I’ve talked way too long.
SM: No you haven’t. Well, thank you very much. Let me go ahead and end the
interview officially. This will end the interview with Mr. Robert Barron. Thank you
very much.