Matthew Lerner: I am with Roy Boehm former commander of SEAL (Sea, Air, Land) Team One.

Roy Boehm: SEAL Team Two.

ML: SEAL Team Two; excuse me, I’m terribly sorry. It is April Seventeenth at 3:30 in the afternoon, Central Standard Time; Mr. Boehm is at home in Punta Gorda, Florida. Speaking of training Mr. Boehm, SEAL training had a reputation for being much more intense and difficult and demanding that any other training in the military, what was the reason behind putting SEALs through such rigorous training?

RB: Well, first we were not trying to get these men to graduate, my class alone started with 140 some odd people graduated twenty-one, fourteen enlisted men and seven officers. Let me tell you about how the people were selected for SEAL. Personnel were selected from volunteers from the fleet, no one arbitrarily ordered UDT (Underwater Demolition Team) and UDTs or SEAL that was the first thing, they are all volunteers. The high degree of desire for UDT, SEAL duty willing to withstand the rigors of hard physical which is basic underwater demolition training, physical, psychological, lazy training, this is sixteen weeks. Those that displayed they’d never give up character if they were found with a team unity, it was a team action, you didn’t get through by yourself. You got through because you were a team and if you didn’t have that you didn’t make it. Another thing, you had to want that more than anything in this world in order to make it.
With the people after they get in we have a high re-enlistment ratio compared to the fleet sailors, we have a retention of qualified SEALs with their extensive training and some spend their entire Navy career as a team, some two twenty year Navy careers, up to forty years. The 1950s and ’60s morale and training operations and leadership were at a peak, innovations of the new equipment, expanded mission, operational commitment, worldwide giving, personnel of all around experience was an exciting thing. Accomplishment and history of the actual combat of this closely knit group, experts thought. We considered it to be the elite of the military. Listen one of the reasons about this, now with the training itself, basically what we were trying to do was mold the unit, we wanted to fight out is this guy a loner, is he a hotshot, is he going to pick up the pieces, is he going to perform it, is he all out for the team because no man is an island to himself, especially in this organization that we had. If we could make a man quit, let’s do so, it’s better to have him quit in training then it is in the field and this is basically what we did. So, we weren’t trying to get the men training, we were trying to really run them out and what we had left over we knew would go the whole route. Now, you say what’s the difference then and the ’60s later on? To answer your question there is that, as the training went on we smartened up for the simple reason that when you get a man drug free, dedicated to volunteer in the first place—in the old days if you broke your leg you were out, or if you hurt yourself you were out. We want to save this unique person that had volunteered for us, that was highly motivated that wanted to be one. Towards the end, later on—this was after the ’60s, we learned this lesson too late that okay, if a man got physically disabled or what have you, we would put him in another group and allow him to rehabilitate himself and get back in shape so that we would not lose this valuable commodity. It was too hard to get somebody as dedicated, as intelligent as this man had to be because on the first stage of the first sixteen weeks was just the beginning, he’s going to be in school for the rest of his life, all the while he’s in the team. The training just goes on and on. Many people say well back in the old days it was this way, that way and the other way. Let me tell you, the kids of today, these enlisted men going through training today, many of them with college degrees, enlisting to be in this unit rather than going as an officer just to be able to get into this outfit, more intelligent, better physical shape, have better equipment and have exceeded out wildest dreams. When I started the
team I was enlisted with all the men from SEAL Team Two before we went in
commissioned and I became their commanding officer and I was a commando out there,
a dirty dozen. Among our jobs was also between 1952 and 1962 was if we had to take
somebody down, if assassination was part of it.

ML: Let me ask you, with the intensive training and the dedication to getting a
man who would be in it for the whole route, how effective was training in preparing men
for combat in the jungles of Vietnam?

RB: As training went on, I trained my group for a year prior to their commission
and they were commissioned in seven January 1962, retroactive to one January 1962 and
by that time SEAL Team Two because I was working on a presidential two priority and
no one else knew about it and I was also operations officer for UDT Twenty-one, I was
already sending my people off to, I opted low opening, halo parachuting to general
survival and Panama and what have you and I was training them to participate in
Vietnam. However, we came under conventional factions and these conventional factions
where leadership took second place was no longer the most important thing for a
promotion, the senior officers became CEOs (Chief Executive Officer), administrators
and they were conventional and they knew nothing about guerilla warfare. They knew
nothing, they didn’t read Mao Tse-tung, they had nothing to do with Che Guevara, they
knew very little about conventional warfare so they went over there to administer a
conventional system in a country that, it wasn’t an aggression from the North it was a
civil war. They didn’t know the people, they didn’t live with the people, they never sat
down and ate monkey brains. They didn’t get the rare fan from the Montagnards or the
couple bracelets that’s on the Montagnards, they didn't live with them, it became an
enlisted mans’ and junior officers’ war in the early part, this is from ’62 to ’64, ’65, say.
It wasn’t until ’66 when we became conventional; when we became conventional they
sent the Marines in there. I had put in the river patrol boat, we started a huge escalation.
If we had any brains in our head we would have quit this war in 19—and I’m sure that
had Kennedy lived, he would have ended the war in 1965. This is one of the things that I
wanted to tell you, but I don’t know whether you have time to it, what led to Kennedy
commitment.
ML: We’ll have time at the end of the interview to discuss that. You mentioned
that there were some differences or say officers who didn’t quite understand guerilla
warfare.

RB: Didn’t quite understand it, they couldn’t spell guerilla.

ML: I know from reading some personal accounts of SEALs that were often
severe differences of opinion between a regular naval line officer and a SEAL officer or
SEALs under their command.

RB: Got that right.

ML: As a commander of a SEAL team, how could you prepare your men for the
fact that they might have to serve under officers who were not going to understand how
to best to employ them, how tough was this?

RB: Let me tell you, my first order as commanding officer of SEAL Team Two, I
said I don’t care the officer is, whether he is the chief of naval operations on down,
obody countermands my order and this is a breach of Navy regulations, but I was
willing to take it. Now, if a man worked for me, he did what I told him to do, he’d say
yes, sir, no, sir, yes, sir right away sir and then ignore it and do what I told him to do and
I think he’d rather face the chief of naval operations and his wrath than mine. That was it.
Now, if you read Point Man, you’ll find that some of that is in there. If you read,
probably Brave Men, Dark Waters, you’ll find that I had five courtmartials going against
me and it took President Kennedy to get me off of them. This is basically the month we
came and—let’s put it this way, the SEAL Team Two, when I started that, we had some
problems. We had, Admiral Holloway was the chief of naval operations, he was a hell of
a fine officer but he come out there and he says, “Look if it doesn’t have wings I don’t
want to talk about it.” Then we had vice chief of naval operations was Horatio Rivera and
he said, “We have no business in the muddy rivers and estuaries.” With all due respect of
my Puerto Rican friend from my admiral’s vice chief of naval operations from Puerto
Rico, it was Lincoln that said and I quote, “Almost, Uncle Sam's webbed feet be
forgotten at all the watery margins they have been present, not all on the deep sea the
freighted bay, the rapid rivers, but also up the narrow, muddy bayous and wherever the
ground was a little damp, they have been and they did track.” So this was Abraham
Lincoln’s letter to J.C. Cochran, twenty-six August 1863. I quoted this to the vice chief of
naval operations and I said, “I think we have every right, but if you can’t get a battleship
up a bayou that doesn’t mean that the war has got to stop being fought there.” There's
another thing that you, unless they’re detained, and so must your students have to pay. I
was a lieutenant JG (junior grade) when ordered to put SEALs together, now, don’t you
think sir under any rationalization that made sense, if they really wanted it to work they
would have put a lieutenant commander or above, possibly an Annapolis man?

ML: So are you suggesting that there was a feeling within the regular Navy that
they did not want the SEALs to work out well because they weren’t conventional
warriors?

RB: I am saying there was a felling because they were lieutenants, that no one had
control of and then the regular Navy, you must have a doctrine for this, you must have a
document for that, you must adhere to it. Now, we adhered to nothing. My men violated
knowing and willingly any orders except mine. Because I was willing to take the brunt,
that’s why I became such a renegade and that’s why my men still to this day in total, ask
me, I talk to them all, I get something like thirty-five, forty that contact me every month,
so we’re still together.

ML: That’s good to hear. Well, speaking specifically of your men, as commander
and as a special warfare operator, how did you view the roles of your SEALs in Vietnam,
how did you think they could best be employed?

RB: Well, in the first place by the time I went to Vietnam, first they employed,
the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) wanted them and the CIA got a lot of them and
they employed them in the junk war as the prizes and I thought possibly as the prizes was
the way to employ them. Then when I got over to Vietnam I found that the man I
relieved, Steve Willis, had trained my men as underwater demolition team for a
conventional amphibious landing. Now that’s the most ridiculous thing you could do in
the bayous and the estuaries of Vietnam, a conventional land. Flying for an island like
Iloilo, hell these people melt back into the boondocks and are gone, you’ll never get
them. You see, in unconventional warfare two people are the unconventional can
entertain and harass a hundred conventionals in try to catch them. Multiply this by say a
thousand and give them a little support from the people either for nationalism and/or for
fear of what you will do to them and you have a support system. This is exactly what
took place in Vietnam. By 1965 we should have pulled out. If President Kennedy—when
I met him I told him I didn’t vote for him, but I’d die for him. This is all part of being in
this.

ML: Well, if you believe that we should have been out by 1965—?
RB: I think that yes, rather than escalate, I also believe that if you’re ever going
to, here’s the way the SEALs should have operated, the mistakes we made was in
Panama. They sent us in to grab an airplane and hold it. The State Department says,
“Okay, take a knife and knock a hole in the tire, we want this here for the guy that’s
coming in,” that’s the safety part of the interference.

ML: You’re speaking about the 1989 invasion of Panama?
RB: That’s right. Let’s face it, that’s not the job. Now if they wanted to take that
plane out of there, the way it should have been was a destroyer at the six pyllum card
could put one shot right in the hangar and that was it. So they misused our SEALs in
Marine type thing, grab a hold and hold it. A SEAL doesn’t know better, we’re a hit and
run outfit. We go in there, we do our dirty deal and if we do it properly you didn't know
we were there until everything blows up. We’re trained to kill people, maim people and
break things. We’re not there to haul things. Now, in the other place where we took the
governor, we saved him, okay that’s our kind of stuff. We go in there, say, “All right
governor, you do or die, whatever, you’re with us.”

ML: You’re speaking about the invasion of Grenada there?
RB: Grenada, right. This is the kind of thing that we do. Now, for us to go into
Vietnam, okay hit, take a taxpayer out, this is what we were doing and we did it well all
the while we were in there. In 1966 when SEAL Team Two went in there we started the
Parakeet Operation, we got more documents and more what have you. We were getting
documents and intelligence and using them. Now, in 1964 when I was in there, I’d pick
up some intelligence, give it to the conventional officers in charge, they would tell me
that, when I said, “Gee I need this information back,” they’d say, “Well you don’t have
the need to know.” I said, “God damn it, I gave it to you and you’re telling me I don’t
have a need to know.” Let me tell you about going into Cuba. You want to read the book,
*Brave Men, Dark Waters.*

ML: It’s written by Orr Kelly.
RB: By Orr Kelly. When I went into Cuba the only people that was a secret from
was the people in the United States. When I walked on that submarine with my five men
we had two commo boats on our tail, we had to go under them. Our intelligence from the
agency and this is from people that were on the ambassadors thing for all years didn’t
know that the water addied so we swam eight hours against the tide and then came back
out and locked in. Now, I went ashore twice during that operation. During my debrief by
the State Department and the CIA when I said, “Well I went ashore because this guy
come down on the horse and we’d have to take him out till he’d catch me men.” Because
they took my weapons away from me, all I had was a knife. He said if I went ashore with
a weapon it’s constituted an act of war, so here’s the games we’re playing. When I got
behind this guy as he stopped there and smoked his cigarette, figured well it would be—if
you read the book you can get all the details on it. I’m going to have to take him out and
I’ve go hold the horse and run it to sea and drown it, right? During the debriefing well I
said well, when I told this story, I believe what I saw and I went up to him and found out
where the guards was coming from, if we’re going to have an invasion we're going to
have to go in and wipe them out first in a commando raid against them. He said, “Well,
that’s coming to kill,” he said, “Well, we’ll have to backtrack over that.” And I says,
“Who in the hell do you think you are to lie to the President of the United States Navy,
who are you? By what right can you do this?” This is the way it was. Now, the
conventional people, let’s get to Vietnam, the conventional people, the conventional
Navy that ran that over there, the first one was Captain Dragmet that I ran into, right after
Diem got assassinated and I can give you details on all that. After President Diem got
assassinated, they also killed Captain Nguyen who was the Vietnamese Navy's chief of
naval operations. Captain Dragmet and Captain Nguyen were friends, that’s the way it’s
supposed to be. However, when the new regime came in there and that was Kahn and that
group, they decided, “Well, okay, our government says okay, we don’t like them but
we’re going to support him.” This is McNamara’s stupidity and a bunch of them and his
advisors, so as they’re supporting him, my skipper who was Dragmet would not talk to
him, to the new chief of naval operations so what the hell good was he? On top of the
other thing, they had all of the military assistant command, what was our most important
product; progress was our most important product. I felt like this was, I was in general
electric, light fixing was our most important product, so when you see signs like this,
when I got kicked out of Vinh Long and Jump Division 33 I said, “We were
outgeneraled, outfought, they had better ammunition, better discipline and they kicked us
out of the base.” He says, “No, we moved across the river because it was strategically a
better place to be.” I says, “Bull, we got kicked out and they put us up.” And the place
they moved across the river was filled with ghosts and—according to the Vietnamese, so
they kept going over the hill, they kept deserting, so the old man says, “There is no such
things as ghost and flatcars.” I said, “Well, if they think there is, there are.” These people
knew nothing about the people that they were sent there to assist. They knew nothing
about the people that they were getting ready to send people in to die for. They didn’t
know the Oriental and they tried to impose occidental logic on an Oriental mind, it does
not work.

ML: Speaking from experience, what were your impressions of the Vietnamese
SEALs, the LDNNs (Lien Doc Nguoi Nhia (Vietnamese Navy Seals))?

RB: Okay, when I got them they weren’t worth the powder to take the boom to
hell. I went out there and I said, “Okay, let’s go out there and we’ll rig some vinyl cord
nets and make some hand grenades.” This is one of my favorite tools for putting white
phosphorus and frags on enemy along our path. They damn near blew themselves up,
damn near blew me up. I told the man I relieved, Steve Willis, “If I catch you in Vietnam
again I’m going to shoot you,” and I meant it. Well, I changed them over from
underwater demolition teams to SEALs; I made commandos out of them.

ML: Were you effective?

RB: They were effective.

ML: How long did it take for you to transform them from this sort of motley crew
into effective SEALs?

RB: Well, in various degrees about four months before I really had them working
good. I mean really taut. I also had a motley group called Viet Hai which belonged to the
jump corps because as fast as I was getting some of these men trained and they became
good, the CIA was taking them away from me and using them for their paramilitary, so I
was losing men without the ability to retrain to start a new training team.

ML: About what year were you—?
RB: Sixty-four. I went over there right after Diem got executed, ’63. In fact Americans dead and what have you all over the place, that’s why I wanted to spend some time and go into why we went into Vietnam and the coup. However, you see President Kennedy met me and put faith in him on a mashilism, figured you would need a person of his caliber in order to cement in, but Madame Nhu and Nhu regime they were doing everything for themselves, the people got nothing and then on top of that, during that time just before his assassination he went out there and wiped out a whole bunch of Buddhists. Assassinated a bunch of Buddhists and when he did that some of the people that we had staying here in the United States, in fact the skippers of the 514 hard core VC battalion educated here in the States, went over to them. You see, our people never did realize it wasn’t just Communist aggression, they never did realize this was a civil war.

ML: So why do you think that is, that the realization was—?

RB: Because people like McNamara and what have you knew nothing about the Oriental, they were too busy feeding a military industrial complex. When I put the SEALs in commission and I was taken up to the president because I didn’t have equipment to operate, when I went into Cuba, I went in bare. When I went in to take pictures of the missile I went in bare. I had no equipment because I was being stonewalled by the bureaucratic thing, no Mike Moran of the BUW dive, O’Connor because we didn’t have a backup system for the AR-15, I couldn't have that. These are things I often purchased; these are things I got courtmartials for, not courtmartials but formal boards of investigation. These are the things that President Kennedy relieved me of. That’s in Orr Kelly’s book but not as much as it going to be in mine when it comes out. So you see, with the conventional Navy, load it on the down roll, fire on the up roll, stand by the gun tank, they knew nothing about the people, the ethnic background, what motivated the Vietnamese. They knew nothing about the Phan Bo philosophy and they certainly never knew nothing about for every attraction there must be an equal or opposite reflection. If you’re going to fight—and another thing is they’re thinking conventional warfare and they won’t listen to anyone that is telling them the way it was. I had the privilege of meeting some of the greatest guerilla fighters of that particular era in the world in the Philippines. Of course they’ve excelled in other countries too, but if you’re going to fight a guerilla warfare you should learn from your enemy, Che Guevara.
ML: Speaking specifically of learning from guerilla warfare, the SEALs who
returned from tours in Vietnam obviously with combat experience and learning more,
how helpful were they to your training of new SEALs?
RB: Oh, they were beautiful because they came back, whether they came back
wounded or whether they came back, they had ideas. I lived thirty miles from the man
that designed the Parakeet Operation; he’s going to be dead in two moths from cancer of
the pancreas. His name is Lesia, Ed Lesia. These are the people that set the stage; these
are the people that the kids coming up followed. I was the leader that they followed
because I broke all the rules, today the wheel as turned. Right now you have men in
better shape, better able to perform more sophisticated missions than we ever thought of
and who still know the basics, whose morale is being destroyed by a conventional Navy.
In other words the wheel has turned, we have written a doctrine for unconventional
warfare. When you write a doctrine for an unconventional warfare, you don’t have an
unconventional warfare because you give a copy of that doctrine to your enemy. The only
way we can win is to do the impossible.
ML: And this is what the men returning from Vietnam were trying to teach?
RB: This is what the men returning from Vietnam did teach. I want to tell you
something else about the officer/enlisted relationship. During the Vietnam War you had
an officer that was in the field with his knife scraping off leeches, brushing mosquitoes so
he didn’t make a noise and sitting in the water as snakes crawled past him through the
night waiting for the ambush. The officers and enlisted men were together. When that
officer had fourteen months experience he could go out there and lead his men because
he knew what his men had been through and what have you. Today after fourteen months
of non-combat, just training drills, these same officers is going up to staff and that’s all
they’re interested, is they’d rather have stripe or other stripe, let me answer this as a little
tip. In today’s Navy, the rate of morale has gone down, is that you have to be a Jack
Armstrong, clean living, all-American boy. They’re not the people that changed the
Navy, it was the renegades, the rogues, it was the people that dared to that changed the
Navy, that designed unconventional warfare. I think of that, it takes more audacity to
have the moral courage to stick by their men, today an officer is handcuffed by those
above him to say my man got picked up for DUI (Driving Under the Influence), we
trained him for twelve years, he can take a submarine and walk down any part of that
ship, he can get a head shot at three thousand yards, we put X number of dollars into him
for twelve years and now he’s going to lose his security clearance because he went out
and let it all hang out one night. You don’t put these kind of demands on people without
giving them a safety valve and if you don’t know that, you don’t know men. Men will
follow the more sickos forever. They’ll follow me forever. Do you realize I never told a
man to do anything I had not done myself?

ML: I would believe it sir. Well, speaking of leadership what characteristics did
you as the commander of SEAL Team Two look for in officers?

RB: Well, as an officer I looked for the same characteristics I looked for in my
men. I don’t think you have time for that and if I went into that I would, well let me see if
I can get it. Let’s see— I’m still looking the maximum guerilla warfare. Following our
definitions we needed covert operations, guerilla warfare, incidents and activity and
premeditated insurgency, psychological warfare subversions, wars of national liberation,
unconventional warfare, there’s all kinds of things that we taught them. Here is some of
the criteria that I considered when I picked the original group. I want a French
protagonist, in other words, command does make actors of us all but men who engage in
guerilla warfare must be able to play any role convincingly. I had people that I could send
in to do anything, they had a good background, they were street savvy. If I sent them in to
be a doctor, guess they could pull that off, if I sent him to be an electrician he could pull
that off. The work experience, the work skills the better, to be quick learn streetwise.

Friends, how does he feel about them? How do they feel about him? Enemies, if so, why,
does he get emotional, how does he handle undesirable situations, is he creative, does he
handle payback with humor, is he sly and cunning? Present problems, will they get
worse, how will they get worse, strongest traits, weakest traits, sense of humor, why,
what beer light, what is his philosophy, what motivates him, what makes him tick, what
does he read? Do I like him, dislike him, if so why? Because I dislike him doesn’t mean
that I can’t learn to like him and he’s unfree, how does he handle his liquor, you can learn
much about your men if you drink with them. Is he strong of character, will this person
perform, is he a saint and sinner, I prefer sinners, they can be relied on, saints often can
rationalize dog turds in the drinking fountain. (Laughter) You like my language?
ML: Yes, sir.

RB: What is his motivation, psychological, what; who does he fear, why? Are his fears a liability, can he control them, can he conquer them? Loyalty, sense of obligation, his devotion to duty, to his team, is the seed within him? Is he mission oriented, mission first, last and always. Finally and I’m sure that’s there many more, is he more apt to say go than no, with awed, refuse the job, start now let us do it. I’m not looking in any of this for Jack Armstrong the All-American boy, nor was I looking for a conformist, I wanted a non-conformist and this led you thinking a venue would do just fine. Would he kick ass and take names, to hell with the name. Would he react to a kill without a hesitation, always a question mark until you do that? Or could he forget the inbred fair play boost yet, that would get him killed, forget to turn the other cheek, you only got four. Could I train that out of them, yes, yes, yes, I would train that out of them. That’s about pretty much the way it went.

ML: That's quite a description. Now, the SEALs were per capita the highest decorated units in Vietnam, everybody agrees that they were awesomely effective. Why were so few SEALs in country at one time? I believe it was only a couple platoons at a time, when there were entire divisions with twenty thousand guys around and so few SEALs?

RB: The conventional couldn’t put up with more than just a handful of us because we broke all the rules, we’d asked for things, if they didn't give it to us, we’d say, “Hey, that’s great, we’ll go steal them.” My influence I think, I shouldn’t put it that way, that sounds arrogant, the influence of my men, when they started Field Team Six and they wanted to go after the counterterrorists, who did they lean heavily on? Marsenko took them all out of my original SEALs from SEAL Team Two, these people was raised, they were used to their officers backing them to the hilt, they were more afraid to come to me, I would back them, get them out and then their ass was mine. They would rather, almost anything than come before me and tell me that they did this, that and the other. Always, if they caught off a bar or they killed the wrong guy, what the hell, the stakes can be made but if you let down your men or you don’t back one of your men, hell if I was there I’d kill you then.
ML: Well, do you think that SEALs could have been ever more effective, had say entire teams been in country at the same time rather than simply one or two platoons?

RB: No, we’re not conventional. That would be the worst thing you can do. The reason I, when I first designed the SEALs it wasn’t designed on a platoon or a given manner or anything else. I’d been given a job, for example when I was getting ready to go into Cuba, I had to take out a military academy, two ships and wipe out some commo boats. I needed to move fast, I didn’t need a cumbersome gang of men or a mob, if you wanted that many get the Marines, get the Army, what have you. I didn’t helmets, I didn’t flight jackets, flak jackets, I didn’t want any of that, I had to move too fast, so I took thirteen men and myself. That’s what I wanted, that was enough for me to attack all my problems, move fast enough to get there before they knew what in the hell was going on. We don’t dig holes and crawl under and say, “Okay, we’re going to hold this hill,” that’s somebody else’s job. But in the beginning, no matter what the mission was, we sent the men up. When I had to go down to Dominica and that Cuban had to be taken out, all they needed was one man so I did it and I thought that if my men were going to be called on for an assassination I better be the first one to do it, because I’m not going to have them do anything I had not done.

ML: Certainly.

RB: I don’t know whether this is going to do your gang any good or not.

ML: Oh sir, it certainly will, any information at all that give us an insight into what the SEALs were made of, what your mission was, how you thought of yourself is very valuable. Let me ask you now something you mentioned earlier that you wanted to talk about, Kennedy and the United States getting involved in Vietnam, what were your thoughts on that?

RB: All right, let me get with you. In the first place, why did we go into Vietnam? The reason we went to Vietnam was a political thing that started at the Bay of Pigs. That made President Kennedy in Khrushchev’s eyes appear weak, our withdrawal from Laos added a confirmation to this weakness. The Communists would have been stepping up the intensity of the psychological for the War of Liberation. I had a friend say, Thomas, an un-Communist Vietnamese independence once and the Communist were defeated and the French puppet, they’re defeated and then boo. Apparently no matter how much men
and equipment was thrown into a pot, a victory would be impossible without four
nationalist leaders. That’s why at the house Kennedy felt that Ngo Dinh Diem was such a
leader. Vietnam was a place for the west to run that clockwork referred to as a
Democratic showdown against the Communist so-called Wars of Liberation. Now, let me
tell you we had vaguely legitimate reason to be in there, but history has shown again and
again the advantage of the insurgents. Again I say that, to fight for the hearts and minds
of the people is deemed an extremely difficult thing and when the insurgent has at his
disposal a philosophy, grab him by the balls and his heart and mind is going to come
along with him. That’s what they were doing. The phrase that Kennedy come up with,
counterinsurgency is in itself a misnomer, to prevent a two man insurgency would take
countless men hours and should they have minimal support, we covered that. What I’d
like to do is our commitment to Vietnam. Other problems prevailed, American aid tends
to lead to political instability took precedence over military stability and nationalism as
fart as the Vietnamese went. Americans most to be in the military were unqualified, they
were unschooled, they were unable to comprehend the intricacies of this type war. You
couldn’t talk to them; you couldn’t explain anything to them if it was in a book. I’ve
always felt that books were made for people who couldn’t think. They were completely
ignorant of the indigenous people, their beliefs, their language, their customs and they
persisted in trying to impose our logic on the Oriental. The men in SEAL Team Two had
been in country in an advisory status since 1962, the very beginning. They indicated that
this war would be an enlisted man’s and junior officer’s war and that’s what it was, it was
the junior officers and the enlisted men. The more senior officers could not be risked in
the field and would not understand the plight of the peasant. Involvement in super rules
of engagement, McNamara's body counts was another one, would inject unworkable and
impractical guidelines on the men in the field. The success on an operation, if you go on
an operation, you had to plan it with your counterpart and if you planned it with your
counterpart you was walking into an ambush. So all my missions was while on a training
mission I encountered this, that and the other thing so that was my way of getting around
it.

ML: So, the South Vietnamese weren’t very reliable as far as—?
RB: Hell, no. My counter part, the officer in charge of the LDNN never went on an operation with me. They had a system over there, it was military and political. You had to belong to two of them in order to go ahead and get your whatever and you get in on all the coups and what have you. Ignoring the conventional warfare, warrior’s council and the statistician’s body count is what you had to do. There were other complications with unqualified officers—of command to advance in rank and they wanted them to achieve their furthest. There is another thing that really comes in here and it’s really bad because as long as you had people like Dragmet of MAAG (Military Assistance Advisory Group) saying progress is our most important product you came up with embellished reports that were not true and then you had people like Puckler who was writing lessons learned in Vietnam on embellished reports, just gets people killed. Getting back to why Vietnam, how delighted when Admiral Ward led a successful blockade against Khrushchev in 1962, the end of 1963, they say we had less than seven hundred. When I was over there, I was under the impression we had four hundred fifty in country American advisors, who the rest of the three hundred was I don’t know, they weren’t out in the field. Now, of note the Geneva Accords has been approved continuously by the congress and I think that this is one of the things that you ought to do, check the Geneva Accords, get rid of all the reasons why and just check it for approval because they’ve continuously approved by the Congress of the United States since 1954, we haven’t been involved with the South Vietnamese withdrawal from the north and we did have an obligation to support them, if you really want to bend the rules. Although realization that the politics and the posturing of the two main rivals, and that’s the United States and the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialists Republics), both changed the words to justify this test for the hearts and minds of the people, basically, that’s what got us in there. You want it; I could go further into intrigued brotherhood and treachery of the new regime, if you have the time I’ll do that.

ML: Umm.

RB: You’re not interested in that.

ML: No, actually I am, I don’t want to keep you on the phone too long. If you think that is important, by all means please do, as I said before, it is not possible for us to have too much information, only possible to have too little.
RB: Okay, well then I’m not going into it, but I’m just going to touch on it. It was intrigue and it was the brotherhood of all those people, the Oriental that convinced me to declare martial law, Nhu would have done fine but he also ordered raids on the Buddhists, the peace plan in August of 1963, the Generals, they were cutting each other’s throats, each one wanted to get in the driver’s seat. It wound up on a three dog flight through the subterranean tunnels, a steam car to a Catholic church, a desperate attempt to negotiate a settlement by the Nhu brothers and he met his death in an armored personnel carrier from the Catholic church and that ended the regime, that was the final hours of Diem and his brother Nhu. I was home, Captain Nhung shot the two brothers and that two soldiers with him are said to have bad post, men, they’re paying it. The only out is to our history, has the ability to be cruel beyond belief and life doesn’t really mean that much and they’re self seeking and what have you. When we try and match wits with the Oriental, we’re coming out second best, because we with our code of conduct, with our military-industrial complex, with lobbying taking precedence over the needs of the mass, I needed the Everson lung, I would have accepted the German dregger, we’re on a bi-American kick and the rigs they gave me when I went into Cuba fell apart. My men coated their lungs with their lime and I said, “If any of them died I was going to kill one life per ass,” and that’s in the book. But I want you to know, McNamara’s apology for Vietnam does not bring back the lives lost between 1969 and 1973 because we killed Americans between that time, but I’m getting the better deal and I feel very strongly—use the SEALs for the guerilla hit and run, to harass an enemy behind his lines. But if you’re going to commit one man to war, be it the Gulf or any place else, make sure that we go into that war to win. I say the only way we could win is an unconventional, I mean unconditional surrender. We were worried over there about what Russia might do or what Russia might not do, was worrying about after we committed, worried the lives that was lost, the maimed bodies, the people in wheelchairs. We the SEALs, you never heard SEAL from Vietnam cry. We’ve always done our thing, we wanted to do our thing, we lived to do it, but we didn’t tie in with the conventional. As close as we ever came to conventional was those wonderful people that flew those Hueys and gave us the air support and close support and come in and got us and picked us up when no one else would come near us. I took seventeen days and nights across the Kamoa peninsula
because my Vietnamese LCI (landing craft, infantry) did not come to pick me up. Again, every time, if you’re like me, every time you go to sleep, you snore, every time you snore, they wake you up. You’re one tired mother by the time you get through. I know that you know my cousin Edward. Well, tell him what you think.

   ML: I will sir. I want to thank you for this interview. It’s been very useful, it’s going to be very useful this semester and the next couple semesters I’m certain. I will get these tapes copied and transcribed as soon as possible and have them sent off to you.

   RB: Just because I say it, don’t mean it’s right, you can put that in there but all my men thought I was right.

   ML: Yes, sir, speaking from a personal standpoint, I think you are also. I’ve only begun my research into Vietnam but everything I’ve discovered you seem to confirm and ring true.