Harriet Langston: Today is June 22, 2002 and we're here with Russ Palm at the home of Ken and Angie Isle. Well, somewhere close to Crossville, Tennessee at the reunion gathering of the 327th Infantry Association. Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed today.

Russ Palm: My pleasure.

HL: This is for the Texas Tech Vietnam Archive. We’re going to ask you some questions. I’d like to start with just the biographical info about you.

RP: About me?

HL: About you, where you were born, how you grew up.

RP: Well I was born in Warren, Ohio. Raised pretty much around Warren, Ohio.

The biggest share of my teenage education came from my stepfather who I didn’t know how much I cared about until it was too late. But that’s beside the point. He was my adversary when I came home. At the supper table that first night it was, “Do you have any questions? You ask them now, when you get up from the table that’s the end of the subject.” And that’s the way it went. But he was also World War II vet, so he knew what I was facing and where I was going. I’m the oldest of seven kids. There’s myself and two younger brothers from my mother’s first marriage. My mother’s stepfather had two boys and then he had two daughters to a woman who died of cancer.

HL: A big family.

RP: There were seven of us all together. Off and on there was dog or two. It just made the family bigger.

HL: Got out of high school about when?
RP: I got out of high school in the tenth grade and went to Vietnam.

HL: Now tell me when that was.

RP: I joined in September of 1964. Was it ’64? Yeah pretty sure it was. No, maybe it wasn’t. Maybe it was ’65. Sixty-five.

HL: Did you volunteer or were you drafted?


HL: How’d the training prepare you for Vietnam?

RP: The training that I got at Ft. Polk, Louisiana is the training that saved a lot of our lives in my opinion. We had DIs (drill instructors) and we had sergeants in training who had been to Vietnam and knew what the situation was. It wasn’t like basic training where I had one sergeant that I know was in Vietnam, who was a Ranger. But the guys that they had in AIT (advanced infantry training) were all Rangers. They were all battle-ridden troops. They knew and they taught us there. That in my opinion yeah, is what saved my life. Because I fell back on my training a lot. I listened not only to what they taught me, but to what the people who had time in country had to say and what to do. When you listen, you learn. I learned what to watch for. I learned who to trust. I learned the looks not to trust. I learned the kids not to trust, the women. It was a big learning experience. Then like a lot of us, it’s haunted me for most of my adult life. I went to Vietnam in April of ’66. I think it was the fifth, but I’m not real certain about the date. I got off the plane at like five o’clock in the afternoon.

HL: Where was that?

RP: In Tan Son Nhut Air Base. I went to Camp Alpha. I got off the plane and I remember distinctly telling myself, “That there’s a war going on in this country?” I mean the country was beautiful. It was serene getting off that plane. Gave me a false sense of security from first impressions. Nine-thirty, ten o’clock that night it rained rockets and mortars for two and a half hours. I learned form the get-go what it was like to be scared real quick. Even though I slept under a metal roof with no walls it was a little sergeant, E-5 that run past me and grabbed me by the shoulder and a mattress at the same time, tucked me under the mattress on the floor and said, “Don’t get out from under it until
somebody gets you.” I stayed there, scared to death, but I stayed there. From Tan Son Nhut I went to Phan Rang for about a week, two week orientation.

HL: Were they doing the P-training at that point?
RP: That what?

HL: The proficiency training where it was a refresher course for you?
RP: It was like a refresher course. They taught us about explosives, which was something that we didn’t get taught in the States. They taught us about det cord, what it was used for, how to use it, how to prime it, how to time fuse to the detonator. They taught us a lot in a very short period of time. From Phan Rang I went to Tuy Hoa to A Company, Second 327. It was right at the end of April, first week of May. It was alright at first. I don’t remember being scared in that first month, first month and a half. Then June run around, this weekend thirty-five years ago. Something like that. Was Trung Luong village firefight. We walked in to that village on June twentieth and we walked out of it on the twenty-fourth. It was the worst four days of my life.

HL: Were ya’ll on patrol as it started?
RP: We were on a search and destroy mission, basically. We were there to secure the village and the valley for a rice harvest. When we got there we had no idea what we had run into. I remember standing on a knoll, telling myself I didn’t want to go in that village and I had no idea why. I was actually sick, was what it was. Somehow I knew and I can’t explain it, but the danger was there. When the shooting started it was almost immediate. It went on for God, forever it seemed.

HL: Where were the enemy?
RP: They were all up the creek bed. I mean at one time our sister company or sister battalion, I’m not really certain was less than 150, 200 yards from us. We couldn’t make contact at all. There was no way.

HL: Were you surrounded?
RP: Well, what we according to Stars and Stripes we ran into a couple reinforced battalions, but in all actuality we ran into two reinforced divisions of North Vietnamese and NVA (North Vietnamese Army). They were there to get the rice harvest is the way I understood it. They may have something else, but the way I understood it they were there to get the rice harvest. We kind of tripped them up. I don’t know.
HL: The firefight lasted?
RP: The firefight lasted, God three days, two nights. Four day, two nights, three
nights. I can’t honestly say. I remember seeing people that had come into the company
and were in the company laying here and laying there. People I believed for years had
been dead. I’m starting to find out that well—Gerald Sweeney for one, last time I saw
Gerald he was slumped over an M-60, with holes in him and there was no life there. I
believed he was dead until last October when somebody told me he was at the last
reunion. Then when we left Trung Luong to my recollection there was myself, Captain
Ferguson, Charles McCorpal and E-5 Sergeant Carter was the people that got on the
chopper. Instead of taking us back to Phan Rang to our base camp, our back to Tuy Hoa
to our base camp they took us to Phan Rang to the brigade camp. We were there for
something like a month rebuilding the companies and the battalion. But there’s a lot of
what happened there that I can see I my sleep that consciously I see and I’m not real
certain about. I can’t honestly be sure that it happened. It’s like I told some of the people
here at the reunion this year I need to make contact with some of these Trung Luong
boys. I need to know how much of what my mind of my subconscious remembers is fact.
I’m not certain anymore, it’s been that long.

HL: Well, you know how many people walked in.
RP: I’m pretty sure I know how many people walked in. We were just a little
under strength as far as the company went.

HL: So that was about how many guys?
RP: Last year Captain Ferguson told me we lost forty-two or forty-three people.
That’s a far cry from the four of us that walked out of there. So, where’s the rest? I
mean a company’s what 130, 140 people? So, I’m drawing a blank like everybody else.
This has been good for me, because yeah, I found two.

HL: The reunions?
RP: From past reunions, I know they’re on the roster. They’re not here; they’re
not on that Wall, like a friend of mine that died in August. He’s on that Wall. I’ve been
to that wall at eleven o’clock at night in twenty below zero in one of the worst winters
D.C. has had in the last decade. That wall was actually warm. I mean I put my hands on
Tom and it was warm. I’m sorry.
HL: It’s okay. Would you like to stop for a minute or should we go on?
RP: Give me a minute, I’ll be alright. I loved him, he was my friend. I used to
tell myself for years that I never lost it over there. Until I got sober and I had to admit to
myself that yeah, when Tom died I lost it. I dumped sixty rounds in a man that was a
thousand meters away. I lost it big time. After that I can’t honestly there was as whole
lot of what happened after June for the rest of my tour that I can remember. I remember
the firefights and I remember the scrimmages. I remember going to Kontum and trying
to help the Five-0-duce and find out where Charlie was at. What his plans was. We were
there for a month, six weeks and never drew a shot. We went back to Kontum and they
put us on planes and before we even got off the ground they overran the Five-0-duce.
I’ve never forgot that. Because we never knew where they were at, we never saw them.
If there’s that many of them there’s got to be a sign of some kind. But we never did.
Some months later we found a tunnel complex in some hills south of Kontum that you
could hide a major city in, but they couldn’t have all been there. Then again, maybe they
could have.

HL: The tunnels really caused ya’ll a lot of damage.
RP: The tunnels are what made Charlie a ghost.
RP: Charlie being?
RPP: The VC (Viet Cong) and the NVA as far as that goes. That’s what allowed
Charlie to be here one minute and over here the next. We never knew where he was at or
she, whoever. We never knew. It’s like coming home I was called a baby killer and a
whole bunch of names I don’t care to mention. And shit happened in the airport and it
didn’t take me long to find civvies.

HL: I’ve heard stories about being accosted as you come home from your tour.
RP: Baby killers, being accosted and piss thrown on you. It’s true.

HL: Did that happen to you?
RP: A woman threw a whole jar of piss on me in Cleveland Hawkins Airport. In
my home state. It didn’t take me long to get changed, it did take me long to get shed.
Maybe that’s the reason it took me thirty years to come out from under the grass and to
finally admit to people, “Yeah, I’m a Vietnam vet, so what?” Then a lot of it had to do
with the fact that my daughter found out that I was a vet when she was young. She
started digging and she hasn’t stopped to this day.

HL: How old is she now?
RP: She’s seventeen. My son is nineteen. I know he cares; I just don’t know how
to explain what it is he’s going through. Of what it is he wants to admit or not admit.

HL: You mean about your military service?
RP: He knows his father’s a decorated vet. He knows his father’s got a hole with
him or got a Purple Heart anyway.

HL: Let me ask you because you received some commendations. What
commendations did you receive and medals?
RP: I got a good conduct ribbon over there. I got a good conduct ribbon from
over there when I got back to the States. I got a Bronze Star with the V-device for
actions in country, in Trung Luong village. And basically that’s it.

HL: So you were fortunate enough not to be wounded? Or did you get a Purple
Heart?
RP: I don’t think anybody came out of Trung Luong that wasn’t wounded
somehow. I mean I got all the way back to Phan Rang to find out I had shrapnel in my
leg. I mean that’s how I got my Purple Heart. I spent two, three weeks running back and
forth to dispensary everyday, getting a few inches here and a few inches there of a
hundred feet of gauze taken out of my leg so that it would heal from the inside out and
not get infected or get jungle rot. Somebody asked me some years ago would I do it
again? For the honor of my country and for my self-esteem, yeah I’d do it again. I mean
I didn’t like it. I don’t think anybody likes it, but I’d do it again. Do I want to see my
son go through it? No. My daughter? No. I’ll take them wherever I have to, but I won’t
let them fight for a government that will stab them in the back.

HL: You feel like that’s what happened to you?
RP: That’s what happened to a lot of us. I mean we were treated badly, whatever
we’ve received from the VA (Department of Veteran Affairs), we’ve had to fight for
tooth and nail.

HL: Did you have an experience with that?
RP: I was five and a half years sober when my second wife filed for divorce.
HL: When was that?

RP: I got sober in ’82. So, that would have been ’87, ’88 I think. It was then that I was in Alcoholics Anonymous. I was working on my steps and it was then and only then that I knew in order for me to go forward to finish my fourth an fifth step, I had to file for another discharge and get my other than honorable turned around to honorable. I had to file for help from the VA, which with the help of AMVETS (American Vets) told me I had to file for PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder). Of course it was during the time of sitting down to writer the paper work and what I was sorry for and how I felt about what had happened that brung Trung Luong back and brung the PTSD down around my shoulders. At the time “Simon and Simon” was a popular detective program on TV. But Rick Simon was a machine gunner in a helicopter.

HL: Okay, the actor Gerald McCrane.

RP: One night I’m sitting there working on this paperwork and writing it up. I’m sitting in the living room, watching but more listening to the television and the sound that I had been listening to in the back of my mind for twenty years I was on TV.

HL: Was on TV.

RP: I was looking at it. It was pretty hard to deny that M-60 machine gun bolt wasn’t happening in the back of my mind. That did trip me over. I went to a friend of mine that was a Marine at like 3:30 I the morning. I drove twenty-five miles not knowing how I got here or whatever. How long it took me to get there. It was daylight when I got there that’s how long it took me to get there. Bill took one look at me and he said, “What’s wrong?” I said, “I don’t know.” He said, “I want you to go in the house and get a cup of coffee, sit down and wait on me. Don’t you leave that house.” I said, “Fine.” So I went up there and him and his girlfriend and I talked for about an hour. He made a phone call to another veteran in Andover. We went and talked to him. He said, “I’ll tell you just exactly what you’re playing with.” He said, “You’re playing with something that can literally explode you heart from within.” He said, “You’re suffering from PTSD and you need to get your ass to the hospital right now.” So I went to the hospital in Eerie, Pennsylvania. Ended up in Hamlet Medical Center there in Eerie for a week, ten days. I thought I was nuts. I thought the world was crazy. It’s just snowballed from there. I filed the paperwork for the compensation. I filed my paperwork to get my discharge
turned around. I get a check in the mail for a large amount of money from the VA and I
have no idea what it’s for. Then I get a letter from AMVETS saying I had been approved
for 30 percent disability for just over fourteen months. Well, that’s a hell of a chunk of
money. So, I knew where the check came from. Well, how did they approve me for 30
percent disability with an other than honorable discharge? It was like five weeks later I
get the paperwork from the government saying that my discharge had been turned
around. Now an honorable discharge, no questions asked. It was like Christmas
morning. It really was. Because I have two honorable discharges from earlier. But I
needed this one to make my life straight or to straighten out my life. I had gotten
character letters and character references from all my brother-in-law, my ex-wife who
was divorcing me at the time even wrote one. I got one from a judge in Ashtabula that he
had never been to Vietnam, but he had a son that died over there. He wrote one. Friends
of mine in Alcoholics Anonymous wrote letters. I worked and worked to get to where
I’m at. Then eight and a half years in the program, Alcoholics Anonymous is not
working. I’m not happy anymore, something wrong. Anytime I’d bring up Vietnam to
anybody in the program, “Ah, just forget about it.” Well, I couldn’t forget about it. It
was there it was in the front of my mind. I needed to do something about it. Well I
started working, I put myself in the Brecksville Hospital is what happened. My ex-wife’s
attorney tried to use that against me, not acknowledging the fact that I put me there,
that nobody else did. That makes a hell of a difference. If somebody else would have put me
there that would have been one thing. Putting myself there was another. That’s when I
started thinking about Vietnam and the people I lost there and the things I had lost since I
had been back here. What alcohol had done to me and this, that and the other. It’s just
snowballing. Then here last October I think it was I found the 327 sight on the computer.

HL: Oh, it was that recently?

RP: I didn’t find it. An old trooper stopped me on 51st avenue one morning going
to work. He just needed somebody to talk to is what it all boiled down to and he was an
older man. I mean he was with the 101st in ’54, ’55. He turned around, we talked for
quite a bit and he turned around and headed back towards his jeep. He said, “Oh, by the
way, 327 has a website.” I said, “Oh, they do?” He said, “Oh, yeah just punch in 327,
101st Airborne Division and hit enter.” So, I threw it around for three or four weeks,
maybe five weeks. I went home one afternoon and I punched the address in the computer and hit enter and the whole world started to open up. That’s basically what’s responsible for getting me here is my computer. Of course my computer is what’s brought me and my two oldest sons together that I hadn’t seen in God, twenty-some years.

HL: How old were they when you came back from Vietnam?

RP: When I came back from Vietnam I think Chris would have been two that next October. I think Rusty would have been four that next October. When I went back to Vietnam, what two and a half, three years later? She filed for divorce and I never saw them again.

HL: So you went for a second tour?

RP: I went back on a second tour because I couldn’t believe what the Army had turned into. When I came in the Army if you back talked an NCO (non-commissioned officer) you’re liable to get your ass whipped. But they weren’t allowed to so that in ’67, ’68, ’69. So, I reenlisted and I went back to ‘Nam and that’s when she filed for divorce.

HL: Were you with the same unit?

RP: No, I went back to a support battalion in Bien Hoa. I don’t even remember the name of it.

HL: Do you remember very much of it?

RP: One-eight-five I think. To tell you the truth I don’t remember a whole lot of the end of that tour at all. All I remember is I did file paperwork to be transferred back to the 101st Airborne Division and the Red Cross Chaplin wouldn’t let me go. That’s basically the way it ended up. I finished up my career at Ft. Huachuca, Arizona. Oddly enough thirty years later I moved to Phoenix.

HL: Is that where you live now?

RP: Moved to Phoenix seven or eight years ago. We’ve been there ever since. It’s like you said I’d like to find a lot of these guys that are still alive from Trung Luong, because I really need to talk to them. I mean it’s like when this PTSD fell around my shoulders is when I was writing the paperwork to get my discharge turned around. It finally ran through my mind that the guy that fired that RPG (rocket propelled grenade) at me that second day was a North Vietnamese, complete with uniformed helmet and all. I had never remembered that from before. All I remembered was seeing that RPG being
fired, it’d pass over my shoulder and take out the top of a tree behind me. That was all I could put together. Then that afternoon or evening, whatever it was, I mean it was like I was standing there. It was happening all over again. Even though I knew I was safe in the dining room of my home I was there. It was real. It was real as it could be.

HL: Can you attribute it to anything? The fact that you got out, how did you survive that Trung Luong?

RP: I don’t know. I don’t remember being scared. I may have been scared. I mean I took out two machine guns with a handful of grenades. The first trick didn’t work, but I went back with more. They threw a hand grenade out on me. I remember looking at that hand grenade; I could’ve reached out and put my hand on it. But the only thin I can remember is thinking to myself, “Mother help me.” That’s it. That grenade didn’t go off. I pulled the pins on the next three grenades and they went in the top of the bamboo and that was the end of the machine gun. It wasn’t too long after that the Cav was there and we were going anywhere other than Trung Luong and it didn’t matter to me where and they took us to Phan Rang.

HL: Do you believe in luck or whatever you want to call it?

RP: Yeah, but I don’t know how much luck played in it. I believe something runs this world, but I don’t attribute it to God. I believe a lot like the Indians did in the Great Spirit. Because something runs this world. I’ve seen too much not to believe that something doesn’t. I’ve seen things I can’t explain. I don’t attribute it to God. I mean I’ll pray with these guys, and I’ll thank God with them, but when I’m by myself it’s me and the Great Spirit and what’s to happen next. I stay safe that way in my heart.

HL: A rose by any other name, right?

RP: Right a rose by any other name is a rose. The rose starts with a bud and it’s here and it’s there every morning to remind me that everyday starts new. It ain’t been an easy life, trust me on that.

HL: Well you know we were never promised an easy life.

RP: We weren’t promised a damn thing.

HL: Dang.

RP: We weren’t promised anything.

HL: No, but you know you’re here.
RP: Don’t start. You’ll get me going.

HL: I’m not, I promise. Take a deep breath. I’m taking a deep breath.

RP: I mean I took a Lizapan before I came up here just so I wouldn’t come unglued. I hope I’ve been of some help.

HL: I think you’ve been wonderful. Thank you so much for sharing this experience that you had with us.

RP: When you guys get around to getting this on the web, let me know somehow.

HL: We’ll do that. I’m going to stop the tape now and we’ll go into that a little more. Once again, thank you so very much.

RP: You’re welcome dear, you’re really welcome. I needed it to I think.