

Interview with Ron Milam
Session 5 of 7
September 7, 2005

1 Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I'm continuing my oral history
2 interview with Dr. Ron Milam. Ron and I are again in Lubbock, in the interview room at
3 the Vietnam Archive. Today is September 7, 2005. It's approximately 10 am Central
4 Standard time. And Ron, since our last session, I've thought about somewhat more
5 general questions, or more general issues of war and also of the Vietnam War and wanted
6 to get your ideas on that. And one of them is the enemy, the individuals and the armies
7 you are facing there during your time as an advisor. Could you describe who and what
8 your enemy was, according to what you witnessed?

9 Ron Milam: For most of my tour, up until the last two months, the first 10 months
10 you might say of my tour, with only one exception that I can think of, we were fighting
11 the Viet Cong. This was of course 1970 and 1971, and there's no question in my mind
12 that, I didn't know it at the time, but now that I'm a—as a historian and looking back, I
13 can put it together that the Viet Cong infrastructure had basically been destroyed during
14 TET; we know that now. And so, the Viet Cong that we fought were not of the
15 regimental sizes or even the battalion sizes that we know existed. They were remnants of
16 that, they were small units, they truly were the farmers by day and the VC by night. And
17 so, most of the enemy contact that we had were Viet Cong were being asked by their
18 superiors to make their presence known in the Phu Nhon district by terrorist actions, the
19 most common one being blowing up civilians on the highway through landmines or
20 through ambush or periodically, once a week perhaps, mortaring our compound, both the
21 American part of the compound and the district headquarters. And I can only assume that
22 they were doing that because that made their presence known; in other words, we lived in
23 a, basically, what we would report back to the superiors in Saigon and ultimately in the
24 Pentagon, I guess, was a pacified district... a successful pacification of Vietnamization,
25 everything. That is, we could go almost anywhere we wanted, all day long, but at night,
26 there weren't very many places you wanted to be other than in your own secure
27 compound. And so, they would mortar us at night. And there was also this responsibility
28 that we had, along with the American engineering company down the road, to keep

1 Highway 14 open between Pleiku and Ban Me Thuot. And so, the enemy that we fought
2 was basically the Viet Cong who were there and were present, and along with the RF/PF
3 group and the PSDF in more of a defensive mode with their own villages, that's who we
4 saw mostly.

5 RV: Let me interrupt for just a second. When you say you saw them, what did
6 they look like?

7 RM: The Viet Cong?

8 RV: Yeah, what were they wearing?

9 RM: Well, I will have to tell you that until towards the end of my tour, I seldom
10 saw Viet Cong alive. When we were ambushed along the highway, and that was mostly
11 highway activity, unless we were successful in terms of killing one or capturing them,
12 and when that happened on a couple of occasions, most of the time, they were gone. We
13 didn't see anything but the remnants. So, the few times that it happened, they were black
14 pajama clad. There was a couple of times, however, where the Viet Cong that we killed
15 were in loincloths.

16 RV: Really?

17 RM: Yes. Rare, rare. So, you know, that issue about were there Montagnards
18 who were Viet Cong, the answer is yes, but I didn't see that as frequently as I saw
19 Vietnamese.

20 RV: How were they, I guess I'm asking about the dead bodies, you know, you
21 saw more frequently, how were they outfitted as far as weapons, any kind of headgear?

22 RM: AKs were pretty standard. We did have one situation where the individual
23 was carrying an SKS, and I was able to—I actually captured that and kept it in my hooch
24 for my tour. Headbands, black headbands in the case that I'm particularly thinking of.
25 No helmets or anything like that. Ho Chi Minh sandals, or what we would call Ho Chi
26 Minh sandals, rubber sandals. Probably one of the things that I was always most curious
27 about is the lack of provisions that they carried, the very small pouch of rice. Other than
28 that, kind of stereotypically what we think of is pajama clad, the pajamas not being very
29 nice, not being very clean, that sort of thing. Soldiers were young usually, I mean,
30 appeared to me probably teenagers. And as far as combat effectiveness, I never really

1 served in a protracted, long firefight with the Viet Cong because they were performing
2 terrorist activities; they were hit and run.

3 RV: And not necessarily on you or the folks you were working with, but on
4 civilians.

5 RM: Yes, well, we saw more of the remnants of their actions in that case. The
6 few times that we were ambushed, and I say few times, it was, I think, as I told you the
7 last time, my short-timers calendar was marked with all of the combat activities, and I
8 had little codes for them. And I think we probably were ambushed—we, our own unit,
9 that is my jeep, was probably ambushed once a month, 10 to 12 times. It seems like
10 almost every time that I went to Pleiku for whatever reason, we'd get ambushed. And it
11 was partly our own fault because we would be kind of pushing the envelope a little bit on
12 whether we should—on the times that we would come home. We'd stay a little bit later
13 than we should have, so we always considered the road to be safe between about eight
14 and five. 0800 and 1700 was the safe time on the highway. If you got out before 0800,
15 the engineers had not had time to clear the road and to do a mine sweep, and they did that
16 everyday. If you came after that time, there wasn't enough activity, enough traffic to
17 make it secure; you were sort of by yourself, and you were setting yourself up. So, most
18 of the ambushes occurred after five. I never went out before 0800, maybe once or twice,
19 but mostly we always went home, we were coming home from Pleiku after 1700 hours,
20 and that was not a safe situation. So we would get ambushed, and almost, in most cases,
21 depending on the size of our convoy, if we were running a single vehicle convoy, which
22 was a mistake or single vehicle, we didn't do that very often, then we just kept going. If
23 you got shot at, you didn't stop.

24 RV: When you say ambush, you mean it could come in the form of some shots?

25 RM: That's what it was. It was usually, it was usually small—it was usually, the
26 first thing that would happen would be a B40 or an RPG, a rocket propelled grenade fired
27 from a B40 rocket launcher. And that would be the first thing, and if that hit the vehicle,
28 then the follow-up would be small arms fire. A lot of times, the B40, thank goodness,
29 would miss, and it would fly over our head, and you'd hear—you'd know it happened,
30 and then the small arms fire would follow. If we were by ourselves, if like I say, if it was
31 just me and a driver and usually a gunner, we had a machine gun on the—we had an M60

1 on each of our jeeps and a .50-cal on one of them, and my jeep, particular jeep, had just
2 an M60, and we had usually a third, usually our interpreter would ride on the back in the
3 machine gun position, standing up. And then I would ride shotgun, and then I had a
4 driver. And when we'd run the roads that way, if we were by ourselves, then we would
5 just keep going. And when we'd get back, we'd made it to the compound, we would
6 report that we were ambushed. If we had at least three vehicles, and that happened
7 frequently, whenever we made a beer run or a food run into Pleiku, or if we were out
8 working in the villages, and we had a lot of times we would take medical people out with
9 us. Bac si, you know, we would take our—sometimes American AMA representatives
10 would come in and do their doctor thing, and we would take them out. If that were the
11 case, we would have three or four or maybe even five vehicles. So if that was the case
12 and we got ambushed, then we would, as soon as we felt like we were out of the killing
13 zone, if it was, you know, the shots are behind you so to speak, we would pull over, and
14 we would pursue.

15 RV: On foot?

16 RM: On foot, yes. The confidence level was that we were being ambushed by a
17 force smaller than us, and we would pursue, and we would call in artillery. We pretty
18 much had—we knew exactly where we were along the road, the highway because we did
19 it so often. We would pursue, and we would call in air strikes or, excuse me, not air
20 strikes, we would call in what was almost organic artillery that we had back at the base.
21 First of the 92nd Field Artillery were located (both speak at same time).

22 RV: (both speak at same time)

23 RM: Yeah, we knew yeah. We'd just call them up, and so we could get artillery
24 up in five minutes, no problem.

25 RV: Would you call artillery before you chased on foot or would you do it—

26 RM: Usually the first thing that we would do when we got off the vehicle is we,
27 of course, we were on the radio, prick 25s mounted on each jeep, and we would
28 immediately call artillery, and then we would pursue.

29 RV: Okay, and how quickly did artillery respond?

30 RM: Five minutes, oh, yeah, because it was all preset locations.

1 RV: Let me ask you this, how many casualties would you take if you didn't turn
2 to fight, stop and fight, basically, or pursue? How often would you take casualties?

3 RM: You mean our own unit?

4 RV: Yes, yeah.

5 RM: I don't believe that... we had guys in the jeeps get wounded from just
6 shrapnel and stuff like that, but nobody was ever seriously wounded. In other words,
7 they were totally ineffective with their ambush. In all of my experience and in all of my
8 people's experience, we never lost anybody on the highway. Now, I can't say that about
9 the other units that—the artillery guys and the engineers lost some people, and we would
10 be part of that. That happened on a couple of occasions, and we were called in. One
11 particular case that I remember, and I may have told this story about the engineer unit
12 that hit a landmine with a deuce and a half. Yeah, that was very—that was my first
13 experience with an American causality.

14 RV: So physically, they were usually ineffective with their shot?

15 RM: Yes.

16 RV: How about mentally? Was there a purpose, do you think, to what they were
17 doing? Is this to kind of harass you?

18 RM: It was absolutely to harass us; it was absolutely here come the Americans,
19 I'm convinced, and let's let them know we're here. And so, what that tells me is they
20 were never in our area, they never had an effective fighting force that was large enough
21 to ever engage us. It was just a matter of—it may have been units in, you know, three to
22 five men kind of thing, even very small.

23 RV: But you didn't really know for sure?

24 RM: No, we didn't know for sure. We would usually find blood trails from the
25 artillery, but we never really—I'm trying to think, two, maybe three occasions where we
26 actually killed somebody. And so the assumption I've always made is based on the times
27 that we found VC was that it was always VC, that there was only one occasion, and this
28 was in October of 1970, October 7th, I recall, when I was out on patrol, and we were
29 ambushed by NVA. That was my first contact with NVA, and then there was virtually
30 none after that until March.

1 RV: Let me stop and ask you a couple questions about these ambushes, and I do
2 want to come back to the NVA and compare the two. But I'm wondering about the
3 mentality that you all had, you wanted to go get food, you wanted to get beer, you wanted
4 to take care of your personal business, you wanted to—

5 RM: And sometimes we were called into meetings. Pleiku was the II Corps
6 Headquarters for MACV, so we would sometimes be called.

7 RV: What about the mentality you all have, like, 'Okay, we're going to go to
8 Pleiku for whatever reason,' and it's decided, and there's no hesitation really; you're
9 going to get food, you're going to a meeting.

10 RM: Right.

11 RV: But knowing most likely you're going to get shot at, most likely that RPG
12 round's going to come in, mostly likely you're going to have small arms fire, and one of
13 you could very well get hit with shrapnel for a case of beer or going to the meeting. How
14 did you deal with that mentally, or did how did you see others deal with it?

15 RM: Well, as silly, crazy as it sounds, if it was—nobody wanted to go to
16 meetings. Everybody wanted to go for beer. I don't ever remember thinking, until the
17 very end of my tour, the last month, I don't ever remember thinking that this will be the
18 time. There is a confidence level that you start achieving after you've been shot at a few
19 times, and after the RPG that I mentioned last time bouncing off the windshield not
20 exploding. You start thinking that you are really better than they are at what you do. I
21 would compare it to any kind of civilian thing, where life and death perhaps isn't
22 involved. You get confident about your ability to do what it is you do, whether that be
23 lead people in a profit-making venture, teach school, whatever it is, you get to where you
24 think you're pretty good at it, and I think I felt that way. So I don't ever remember
25 thinking, 'Gee whiz, I shouldn't do this,' until the very end of my tour.

26 RV: And that's because you were going home? Your time was very short.

27 RM: Yeah, yeah, exactly. It's just one of those things you did. The other thing
28 that I've always thought is interesting now that I read a lot about Vietnam, more so in the
29 last five or six years than I ever did in my life, is I also don't ever remember thinking that
30 because I was an officer, that somehow or other I was different than my NCOs or enlisted
31 guys. We were such a small unit anyway, with two MAT teams and an advisory team, 15

1 total people that everybody had to do these things. And so the only thing that I sort of did
2 that maybe was pulling rank if you will, as far as those things are concerned, is I seldom
3 drove, and that was more a function of, I think as I told you last week, I didn't even know
4 how to drive a stick shift until I got into Vietnam. I'd never driven a stick shift, so it was
5 more a function of not being good at that and not being real confident with my ability to
6 drive than it was my fear. And riding shotgun I just thought was a good position for me,
7 so I didn't drive as much as most of the other people.

8 RV: Was there a place in this road on Highway 14 where you would expect the
9 shots to come from, or would it happen randomly anywhere?

10 RM: Well, it was somewhat random, but I can also remember that there were
11 certain places that the incidents were higher, not just incidents of my own situation, but
12 like I say, if I'm in my own memory now and saying that, maybe, in my own
13 experiences, we got ambushed once a month, say 10 to 12 times in my tour, that's just me
14 individually. There's 15 of us; I think every single person who served with me would say
15 the same thing, and they weren't always with me, which means that probably, maybe
16 almost every time we went out, we got ambushed. Somebody from the unit got
17 ambushed. And we would mark each ambush on a map, so we knew exactly where these
18 incidents were taking place, and to this day, I can remember where those places were, so
19 much so that when I went back to Vietnam in 2001, we, of course, drove Highway 14
20 from Ban Me Thuot to Pleiku, I pointed out to my wife all the places that were most
21 highly, more likely to be ambushed than others.

22 RV: How did you feel being back there?

23 RM: Oh, it was just as weird as it could be, but nothing had changed, I mean,
24 nothing had changed. Well, by that I mean the natural, the mountain and the river and the
25 bridge, all those things, they don't change because the war's over. Now, you know
26 villages come and go and stuff like that, but as far as the road itself and the turns, where
27 the turns in the road, I particularly remember exactly where one turn was. It seems like
28 we got hit every time we turned that corner.

29 RV: And you told Maxine this?

30 RM: Oh, yeah, in fact I did more than that. We stopped and filmed it; we made a
31 part of my video that I show in my classes.

1 RV: What kind of emotions were you feeling on this revisit?

2 RM: Oh, it was very strange, it was very strange. But it was also kind of neat that
3 I was not having to worry about being shot at and that my wife was with me, and I wasn't
4 carrying a gun; that was kind of nice. Yeah, so I just don't ever remember those—I don't
5 remember making a big deal out of those incidents. I don't remember thinking that they
6 were ever going to guess because they didn't in my tour. And I say that having been
7 ambushed on an operation by the NVA and taking casualties, both us and them, earlier in
8 my tour. But it was almost as if I know the NVA aren't going to set up an ambush on this
9 highway to get us; I don't know why I knew that, but I just did. And if it's not the NVA,
10 then we're okay as these guys are amateurs. Now the question is as a historian, was I
11 thinking that at the time, or am I thinking that now looking back on it? Most likely it was
12 reaction, it was just my gut feeling that I'd been there 9 months, 10 months by the time I
13 get to there, and I say, 'They haven't gotten this yet, they're really that bad.' Same thing
14 with their mortar effectiveness, and they'd mortar us probably once a week. We'd take
15 incoming, and there were times when—and it was usually no more than four to six
16 rounds. They didn't even do the two rounds and then adjust kind of stuff that effectively.
17 We had a little damage inside the compound but not much. Nobody, none of us were
18 ever wounded from mortar fire until the night of the big siege. And so we thought they
19 were not good at that either.

20 RV: They were basically letting you know, 'We're here.'

21 RM: 'We're here.'

22 RV: 'And we're not trying to'—as far as you guys know, they're not trying to kill
23 you.

24 RM: Yeah, I think they were trying, but they were not trying real hard. They
25 never said, 'Hey, let's go out with a unit of 30 instead of 10,' or 'Let's take some more
26 effective weapons or let's use some 120 mm rockets instead of these 60 mm mortars,' on
27 our compound. Again, that all came much later in my tour. In this beginning thing, I
28 have always attributed it to, and this will be hopefully part of my next book, I believe that
29 the 4th Division's presence, and they were there until October of 1971, so I believe that
30 their presence was the reason that the NVA were not in the province, or at least were not
31 in the district. I can't say because the province goes all the way up, I believe the province

1 included all the way up to Kontum, north of Pleiku, and I know it included Plei Me and
2 Plei Djereng and places like that. So it may be that there were some areas that weren't as
3 pacified, but I felt like we were a pacified district and that all this was just harassment.

4 RV: I'm almost picturing, okay, we're the Viet Cong, for example, and we're like,
5 'Alright, whose going to go out, what five or six of you are going to go out and shoot the
6 mortars tonight. Okay, go out and fire them, and hurry back, so we can finish roasting
7 something over the fire or being with our families.'

8 RM: It's very likely, very likely. Or it may have even been VC who were truly
9 Montagnard villagers that I knew, that would see us come into the villages at two o'clock
10 in the afternoon and do our medical thing, do our—we had a lot of outbreaks of spinal
11 meningitis, and so we would go in, and we would inoculate people, and we would give
12 food to the kids and candy to the kids, you know, stuff like that. We'd do those little
13 innocent things. And then it may be that for whatever reasons, that would be the night
14 that they would hit us to let us know that, yeah you're here, and so are we. I don't know.

15 RV: It's very interesting. What are the strengths that the NVA possessed?

16 RM: The NVA?

17 RV: The NVA.

18 RM: Well, I had two major contacts with the NVA, one in October of 1970 and
19 then the other in March 15th and 16th and for the following week, at the siege of Phu
20 Nhon in '71. So the first contact that I had with the NVA, October 7th, 1970, was we
21 were to—the plan was that we had heard, we had some intelligence that indicated that
22 about probably 12 kilometers to the east of our compound, there was a sighting of an
23 NVA small unit.

24 RV: By a FAC?

25 RM: No, it was by some intelligence from a village, from someone that had been
26 in what was—it wasn't really a free fire zone, but it was where people weren't supposed
27 to be. We had moved a village that was about 20 clicks in, we had moved that village to
28 the highway, starting in about August. And a lot of the people wouldn't stay, and they
29 were going back, and so we had to be careful about declaring that a free fire zone; it
30 really wasn't. These were Montagnards. And so we got some intelligence that a small
31 unit, and that could have been a scout team or a platoon size-wise, of NVA had been

1 seen. And that was the first time, I'd only been there since August, but up until—well, I
2 was there in July, and in July and August, we had been out on operations trying to find
3 the NVA with our ruff-puffs, and we had not found any. It appeared to us that the NVA
4 had left the district. So this was the first time we had intelligence that indicated that the
5 NVA were back, and it was October, and it was about the time that the 4th Division were
6 leaving for good from Pleiku. They had a big compound, 15,000 strengths, they're gone.
7 So I went up in a headhunter and surveyed the area and laid out this plan.

8 RV: Did you see them?

9 RM: No, no, didn't see anything on the—but we said, 'Okay, let's go ahead, let's
10 go ahead and operate and conduct an operation tomorrow.'

11 RV: The purpose of which was to make contact.

12 RM: To make contact, yes. So we went out with a unit of, let's see, we took a
13 unit of probably, I'm going to say 35 RF/PF, and these were probably PF, more Popular
14 Forces than Regional Forces in that sense, and I'm a little hazy in my memory of the way
15 the organization worked in Phu Nhon. I know how it was supposed to work in terms of
16 the country, but in our district, it was a little different, but I believe, thinking back to the
17 way we were dressed and everything, they were in steel pots and you know, traditional
18 Army uniforms. My interpreter, my RTO and one of my platoon sergeants, or one of my
19 ranking platoon sergeants, would have been an E6, and then we took with us also two
20 Americans that were part of an infantry platoon that were attached to the engineering
21 battalion that was responsible for the security—not the security, but for the construction
22 of, and the repaving and the keeping clear Highway 14.

23 RV: And why? What was the purpose of having them there?

24 RM: They were just good guys. They were Americans, and they were really good
25 infantry soldiers and a little bit crazy. We became friends with this platoon of guys
26 because these guys, they were a platoon of about—well, it wasn't a TOE, it was called a
27 platoon. It was probably 18 to 20 Americans, most of whom had a lot of combat
28 experience in Vietnam; they were on their second and third tours. They were assigned to
29 protect the vehicles when they were on the highway, but because sometimes they didn't
30 have enough to do, they hung out at our compound. And they were just good guys, and

1 they, like I say, in the somewhat crazy in the sense of they loved to go out on operations.
2 They lived to fight.

3 RM: And you said, 'Hey, guys, we're going to go out tonight after NVA.'

4 RV: Yeah, and I'm not sure that I even had to say it that way. It was sort of like
5 because they were probably around when they heard that I was taking the operation out,
6 obviously I was going to be the ranking officer, they volunteered. And so, they went out
7 with us, so that was the unit. So there was probably 35 of us. We had a preplanned
8 artillery, laid it out. This was my first operation where I was sort of in charge. I think I
9 was on other operations before that, but this was the first one that I felt like I was in
10 charge; I was the ranking officer. It was also at a time when I was the Mobile Advisory
11 Team leader. The leader had left, and they had not replaced him because the TOE on
12 Mobile Advisory Teams was a captain and a first lieutenant, and I'd just been promoted
13 to first lieutenant, and there was no captain around, so I was the team leader for about six
14 weeks, until they brought in a captain over me. So we were out on this operation, and I
15 remember the sound as if it were yesterday- a click. That's how close they were. The
16 click, the firing of the B40 rocket, it has a click sound to it (imitates rocket), and then a
17 whoosh. And a B40 rocket that I'm sure was aimed at me because I was in the center of
18 the formation along with my RTO; it was either aimed at me or the RTO with the whip
19 antenna coming up.

20 RV: Is this nighttime or daytime?

21 RM: Daytime. It was 1400 hours I'm going to say. In fact, I think it was exactly
22 1400 because we always used to comment that in our earlier experiences, when we had
23 had enemy contact out, it never happened between 12 and 1400 hours. Never.

24 RV: Like not during lunchtime here.

25 RM: Siesta, absolutely siesta. Viet Cong and our guys always had, you know,
26 respected each other's downtime.

27 RV: Interesting.

28 RM: And at about—so I think we probably had stopped for lunch and were back
29 up, although that's a little not clear in my mind as to whether it happened, but the time, it
30 definitely was 1400 hours because I remember writing the After-Action report. And I

1 remember hearing the sound, and then I remember no explosion. The B40, the RPG hit a
2 tree about three feet from my head and fell to the ground.

3 RV: Oh, my.

4 RM: Did not explode.

5 RV: So at that moment, what are you thinking? Like, 'Oh, my God, I'm so
6 lucky,' or 'Oh, my God, they're watching us.'

7 RM: No, no, none of that. 'We're in an ambush.'

8 RV: Just immediately.

9 RM: Absolutely, absolutely. And then the small arms fire, nobody was hit, and
10 then we returned fire. And we laid down a lot of steel.

11 RV: What did you do, just hit the ground where you were?

12 RM: Hit the ground. Hit the ground exactly where we were. And then we start
13 firing. And then their firing stopped, and we heard screams and moans. So we pursued
14 them, and we had wounded an NVA officer. I don't know, I believe the equivalent of
15 first lieutenant. I'm trying to think now... Trung-uy, as I recall—

16 RV: Which means?

17 RM: First lieutenant. Second lieutenant is Thieu-uy, and first lieutenant is Trung-
18 uy. And he was down, and he had been wounded, shot in the abdomen, and his intestines
19 were out. And that's the first that I had seen that in a living person. I'd seen it in dead
20 people, dead VC, but I'd never seen it in someone that was still alive.

21 RV: Was he uniform?

22 RM: He was in uniform. He was in a nice uniform, a clean uniform. And he was
23 not even in shock. I remember his skin color staying dark, staying brown, and the reason
24 that that's so clear in my mind, part of the reason it's so clear in my mind is that I wrote
25 about it a little bit in my dissertation and putting it together with some things that I'd
26 done in the past. But the thing that was most striking to me is the color differential
27 between his intestines and his hands, which were very brown, very dark.

28 RV: And the intestines were what color?

29 RM: White.

30 RV: They were white. Was he bleeding profusely?

1 RM: No. I remember the stomach wound, the abdomen wound out. I got on the
2 phone—or, I got on the horn immediately, and I called some of the preplanned artillery
3 in, and then I called in gunships, Cobra gunships. I'd never done that.

4 RV: Were you—

5 RM: On their egress route.

6 RV: Yes. Had you been looking forward to that moment where you could call in
7 some—

8 RM: Oh, I don't know that I'd been looking forward to it, but this was the real
9 deal. This was the first time, I guess, I'd been ambushed, I'd been mortared. We'd even
10 been, in my very first contact when I earned my CIB, I'd been fired at and VC, and I
11 knew that a round had just missed my head because I picked up the AK47 round that had
12 hit the bamboo behind my head. In fact I still have it; it's made into a ring now. So I had
13 been, you know, I'd been close and all that kind of stuff. But this time, I was now having
14 to do something else. It was like there was something to do. Now, this is obviously
15 NVA, so if he's NVA, then he's not alone. Why are they there? Scout team, whatever it
16 is, but I also don't ever remember thinking, 'My goodness, there could be a 150 of them
17 out there, and this is the lead unit.' Maybe in the general vicinity, that's why we called in
18 the gunships because the artillery wouldn't know. But you call in gunships, they'd be
19 able to see. I also called in, and then the thing that I think I'm as, you might even say
20 proud of, is I called in a Medevac for the wounded NVA officer. We knew he was an
21 officer because of his rank, his insignia, and he was carrying a pistol, cigarette lighter
22 which I have, and a pistol scabbard, which I also have—or holster. And so, we pursued.
23 Now, we didn't pursue very far; we pretty much stayed on this guy. We set up our
24 perimeter, and I stayed with him.

25 RV: Tell me, his eyes were open? Was he trying to communicate with you?

26 RM: I got my interpreter over, and we tried to communicate, and he wasn't saying
27 much. And I remember my biggest concern being his safety, making sure he made it. In
28 fact, this is going to sound strange, but my—and I have written about this—my, one of
29 my—the guys from the engineering platoon, Pierce, reached—he carried a Special Forces
30 type knife, and I don't remember exactly the name for that, but it was a special kind. It
31 almost looked like a Bowie knife, a Bowie knife that it had a lot of carvings—or not

1 carvings, but etchings on it, so you could break wire with it. Survival, a survival knife, I
2 think the pilots carried them too. But he had one that he'd bought on the black market
3 somewhere, I guess, and I remember him reaching over, and I knew these guys were
4 tough guys because they had shown me pictures of enemy contact that they had had, and
5 they had shown me varying things that bothered me even, you know, them in poses with
6 dead NVA or VC, I don't recall exactly in these pictures.

7 RV: What kind of poses?

8 RM: As if the dead were deer. Posing with them as you would pose for a
9 magazine, holding the ears as if it were the deer they were...

10 RV: Okay.

11 RM: So I knew these were some kind of crazy guys. Loved having them with me
12 on operations because I knew they were combat tested. And I wasn't in this kind of
13 action, I was, you know, up to that point. And I remember him reaching over and pulling
14 that knife out, and I yelled at him, and I said, 'Hey, I'm not Lieutenant Calley.' And I
15 remember that because he repeated it to me later that night when we were drinking beer,
16 and he said, 'No, LT, I'm going to cut some gauze.' And with the other hand, he had
17 taken out a package of gauze, and he took the knife, and he cut the gauze, and we
18 bandaged the guy up.

19 RV: Wow.

20 RM: Did a great job with him. Saved his life, no question. Called in a Medevac,
21 put the guy on the Medevac, and he was taken back to our district headquarters for
22 interrogation.

23 RV: When you asked your interpreter to come over, what were the first questions
24 you asked this officer?

25 RM: 'How many more of them are there? How many of you are there?' And we
26 didn't get an answer, but by that time, the artillery was raining in because artillery, like I
27 say, that's easy to bring in. And then I called off the artillery, and now it's a little bit
28 hazy in my mind as to whether he then said, 'There's 100 of us.' I don't think he did, but
29 whatever his answer was, it was... it gave me enough cause for concern that—or for
30 opportunity. Probably for opportunity more than concern that we could affect body count
31 and that the best way to do that is with the Cobras. So, I knew the Cobras would

1 probably accompany the Medevac anyway, so it wasn't like I was doing something that
2 was, I don't know whether I was ever concerned about this, but thinking back on it now
3 was, why would I bring in Cobra gunships if I've already got one guy down, and it's a
4 small unit or something? But I think I was probably rationalizing that the Cobras would
5 come in with the Medevac anyway, and so therefore, we might as well use them. So
6 brought the Medevac in, put the guy on it. None of us were wounded, nobody was hurt at
7 all. And so we put him on the Medevac, got him out, brought in the Cobras, blew up, you
8 know, lit up everything in the general area, and then walked back to our compound. So
9 this is 12 klicks out, and so we went back. And I remember going back is pretty vivid in
10 my mind because we had to cross a lot of rice patties, and there's always this issue, you
11 know, you read about it all the time, American units, whether you walk the dikes or
12 whether you walk in the—and I remember knowing all that because I studied it, you
13 know, I know we were not supposed to walk the dikes. But I also remember wanting to
14 get back because now we had this contact. See, we went out on that enemy, on that
15 contact, I mean, we went out on that operation, and I don't remember that I thought for
16 sure that we'd make an enemy contact. I think it was surprise to us, so now it's like
17 probably 1600 hours, and we need to get back, and if we have another contact on the way
18 back, then it's going to be even later, and then you're going to get into dark and all that
19 stuff. And I remember wanting to get back quick, so I remember crossing these rice
20 patties and walking the dikes and knowing that that was not smart, you know, you're
21 exposed, you're up. But I didn't want to get down in that damn water. And it was not
22 planned that we go back. It must not have been planned that we go back that way; we
23 must have been planning on going a different route because we did go back a different
24 route, and I think maybe that was planned. Maybe it was a circular plan that way. But I
25 do remember the incident just like it was yesterday, and we got back by dark, before dark
26 because they were interrogating the NVA officer.

27 RV: You saw him again? He was back?

28 RM: I didn't go see him. I didn't want to. The interrogation responsibilities in
29 our unit, we had an S2, we had an intelligence officer, a captain, Dai-uy, and he and one
30 of the men, another man on the district team, an NCO were part of an intelligence unit
31 that we didn't really have much to do with. They didn't go out on operations with us;

1 they did all the interrogations and everything. They were the ones that monitored the
2 Phoenix Program in our area and all that sort of thing. And I remember coming back,
3 and they were interrogating him in another room.

4 RV: Could you hear it?

5 RM: Yeah. All I asked was, 'Is he going to make it?' I remember asking that,
6 and they said, 'Yes.' I said, 'Is he giving us anything we can use?' and they said, 'Yes.'
7 And that's all I found out.

8 RV: What did you hear?

9 RM: I didn't hear screaming; I heard yelling.

10 RV: From?

11 RM: I heard yelling from—I heard yelling in Vietnamese from our interpreters
12 and from him, I assume him. And this was a big deal, I mean, this was a big deal. The
13 District Chief was there, our major was there. Everybody but those of us who had caused
14 it to happen, and we were drinking beer.

15 RV: And you essentially captured an NVA officer, that's huge. Your first NVA
16 contact, and it's your operation. Is this your first operation you're in charge of?

17 RM: Yes.

18 RV: How did you feel?

19 RM: I felt good; I felt real good. I felt good for a variety of reasons. I felt good
20 because number one, this guy was alive, and my guys had kept him alive, and our actions
21 and Medevac had kept him alive. I remember feeling a lot of respect for this guy. I don't
22 remember hating him. I don't remember hating him as the enemy the way you hate—that
23 I hated the Viet Cong, as much so that were firing at me from the, you know from the
24 road everyday kind of thing.

25 RV: Would you have Medevac'd the VC if you had done something?

26 RM: Oh yeah, yeah, I think I would have. But I don't—everything just happened
27 very quickly, and no one argued. Nobody said, 'Hey, LT, what do we want to waste a
28 Medevac on?' No, nothing like that. It was just automatic, let's get him back to the
29 compound. Well, the Medevac, now this is another thing. We Medevac'd him... and I
30 don't know that I knew where he would end up. I don't know that I even made that
31 decision.

1 RV: So your Medevac was more a normal kind of procedure, humanitarian more
2 versus, okay. this guy's an intelligence coup for us, or was it a combination?

3 RM: I don't know that I made that decision. I don't know why the Medevac took
4 him back to the district compound instead of Pleiku to the hospital. I don't know the
5 answer to that.

6 RV: He obviously got medical treatment back at your compound.

7 RM: Yeah, oh, yeah because we had a medic there, and we had a medic on our
8 OP. Well, wait a minute, we didn't have a medic on the operation; we did our own on
9 him. We all knew what to do, but back there we had a medic, so they would have
10 attended to him there. And I then I think the next stop would have been the Pleiku
11 hospital, but it bothers me a little bit today that I don't know what else happened to him.
12 Even—I don't mean that I don't know where he is today, that would be—but it bothers
13 me that I don't know and don't, apparently didn't acquire about what happened to him
14 then.

15 RV: You were, you know, internally shaken up by the whole experience and just
16 overwhelmed maybe.

17 RM: Well, I don't—or—

18 RV: I mean, not in a bad way.

19 RM: It's just so routine; it was just so like, this is what we do, and so therefore the
20 next day, we did something else. Although, there was nothing ever quite that significant
21 that happened, I mean this, like I say, this was a big deal. We were—I and my RTO and
22 my sergeant were all three given the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry with Bronze Palm for
23 the action. And I'm not sure about the two Americans from the—I don't think they were
24 awarded anything because they weren't supposed to be there. They didn't want their
25 superiors to know that they weren't drinking beer with us over at the compound that day.
26 I think that's what happened.

27 RV: Interesting.

28 RM: Yeah.

29 RV: Let me ask you, if you don't mind indulging me, when you come to him, and
30 he's there, and you are—you're thinking, 'Okay, I'm going to try to patch the guy up, I'm
31 going to do the Medevac.' I mean, I guess you're thinking this. You call the interpreter

1 over; you're trying to find out how many more are out there. Do you try to communicate
2 personally to him? Do you say, besides, you know, 'How many more are there of you?'
3 After you get that answer and after you have the artillery coming in and after you've got
4 the Cobras, I guess, coming in and the Medevac, what do you do? Do you move away
5 from him, do you stay?

6 RM: No, I stayed right there.

7 RV: Stayed beside him? Were you kind of kneeling there?

8 RM: Well, we had a perimeter, and the way it works, you set up your perimeter,
9 and then you set up a CP within it, and the CP was essentially me, my RTO and the
10 wounded guy.

11 RV: And so you're on the radio, you're doing this stuff, and the interpreter, I
12 guess, is there as well.

13 RM: Yeah.

14 RV: South Vietnamese?

15 RM: Montagnard.

16 RV: He was a Montagnard? Did the Montagnards show any hostility toward the
17 soldier?

18 RM: Yes. Yeah, I do recall that. I recall that the Montagnard interpreter, and we
19 would have had other Montagnards in the unit I'm sure, but my Montagnard interpreter
20 who I was very close to was really screaming at him. And I—you were asking did I try
21 to communicate? I didn't try to communicate directly in terms of using my Vietnamese;
22 my English came out, and as I would talk, he would interpret for me as I would ask the
23 questions. But in my mind at this moment is not, 'I wish it were clearer all the things that
24 I wanted to know,' and I don't recall, and because it's not fresh in my mind and other
25 things are, I'm not sure that I believed that at that moment, other than finding out how big
26 a unit they were, I'm not sure I was overly concerned about the bigger picture. I figured
27 that would be up to somebody else that we had our hands full.

28 RV: I don't really—I can't imagine you kind of putting all this into some big
29 picture when you're sitting there right in the middle. You've just been ambushed, you
30 fired back, here's an officer severely wounded in front of you, and you're trying to figure

1 out, you're protecting your men, you're trying to carry out your mission. You're
2 probably not thinking—

3 RM: No, I was thinking globally or a bigger impact or anything else. I figured
4 there was other people that can deal with that.

5 RV: What did you do with the guy's intestines? I mean, do you just kind of push
6 them back in and wrap the gauze?

7 RM: Yeah. I don't think we pushed them back in. He was trying to cover them
8 with his fingers, and I always wondered whether he was trying to hide the wound from us
9 or if it's a natural instinct to do that.

10 RV: To hold them in.

11 RM: Yeah. I remember we pulled his hands back, but then we bandaged him, and
12 we did the bandage around the back kind of thing, so that they would be held in. Now,
13 I'm sure we put something over the top of the gauze also, some kind of an elastic
14 bandage. I don't remember that part too much.

15 RV: Do you think he was surprised, or did he act surprised that you were not
16 going to kill him and that you were going to Medevac him and were trying to take care of
17 him?

18 RM: I don't know the answer to that. I'm guessing that he was surprised at the
19 care that we took with him. That had an indelible impact on me, and I... and as part of
20 my dissertation, as part of my whole attitude towards the war and everything about it, I'm
21 always amazed when I hear men from American units that somehow or other—and this is
22 October of '70, and as you know, then March, April, May of '71 when the Winter Soldier
23 Investigations all start and everything. And I would read and hear about people in
24 American units that supposedly took no prisoners and how they, you know, supposedly
25 would brag about killing NVA soldiers, and I never—well, two things, I never
26 understood why you would do that because militarily that is the dumbest thing you could
27 ever do. There were very few times in Vietnam when American units could not take
28 prisoners logistically. You know, you hear about you're on some kind of a march, you
29 know the World War II kind of thing, and if you took the prisoners, then it would slow
30 you down and stuff, and sometimes those things happen. But I never understood, in
31 Vietnam that was very seldom the case, and it was also a case in Vietnam where

1 Medevacs were always available, so you could always take—virtually always take care
2 of enemy soldiers. And it makes no military sense whatsoever to execute a prisoner of
3 war because they've got so much intelligence. They're what you're out there—the fact
4 that you have just accomplished that, you can save lives by getting information from
5 these guys. Now, I can't speak to the interrogation techniques and methods and stuff like
6 that; that's not my area, but it made no military sense, and I always doubted why any
7 officer would allow that to happen because it makes no sense. You want to know what
8 he knows.

9 RV: Right.

10 RM: And so, to say, 'Oh, we executed all of our—' that makes no sense. So I
11 always doubted it; I always wonder about guys that talked like that.

12 RV: I've heard it in my interviews.

13 RM: I know, I'm sure you have. It makes no sense. As an officer, well, as an
14 enlisted man if you're doing it, you should not be ever doing it at the direction of
15 somebody who has a mission. And the mission is, well, you have a mission, you also
16 have a mission to keep your guys alive, and you want to know what this guy knows.
17 Now, in this case, I thought we had a prize, and we did. We had a junior officer. But it
18 was an important thing that happened in my tour, and I'll never forget it. It was really
19 quite a deal, and yet it was all in an afternoon's work. It wasn't like we did it after a two-
20 week operation.

21 RV: Is that between two and five in the afternoon?

22 RM: Absolutely. We went out about nine that morning, so we had gone out quite
23 a ways. In fact, my guess is, now that I'm thinking it through here and talking about it,
24 my guess is that when the fire fight happened or what it was, and the incident happened,
25 we probably were a lot closer to the compound than I had thought at the time. And I
26 think maybe we took a shortcut back in.

27 RV: You were in your way back in?

28 RM: Yeah, we got back, you know, I think we were back by—I know this, that
29 when I called back in as we usually did when we were out is we said, 'Hey, make sure
30 Jim holds some chow for us.' I remember being hungry. But we felt good that night; we
31 felt like we had really accomplished something.

1 RV: Did you write Maxine, tell her about it?

2 RM: I don't know whether I did or not. I think I probably did in some veiled
3 fashion. But I remember getting my CIB so early in my tour, but I remember feeling like
4 I'd really earned it. I wasn't quite sure about the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry. There's
5 a memory there that says that we were so proud of what we had done but that our
6 commanding officer didn't think it was any big deal, and none of us got American
7 awards, and it was the Vietnamese who gave us the award.

8 RV: Why in the world would your commanding officer not think that was a big
9 deal?

10 RM: Because he wasn't there.

11 RV: He wasn't out on the operation with you? So was it a jealousy thing?

12 RM: Yes.

13 RV: Did you all realize that?

14 RM: Yes, it was part of the problem with the command structure.

15 RV: In Vietnam or with your—

16 RM: No, well, I think in Vietnam based on my research, but my own personal
17 experience was that there were certain people like that that had trouble giving awards to
18 lower-ranking people if they weren't involved themselves. And I remember when the
19 Vietnamese decided to give us the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry.

20 RV: Who made that decision?

21 RM: The district chief. He was very impressed, the district chief, the Vietnamese
22 district chief.

23 RV: Who was there that night doing the interrogation?

24 RM: Yes, yes, yes.

25 RV: Was it like, okay the next day I'm going to—

26 RM: It was about three weeks later, and they had this big ceremony over in Phu
27 Nhon village on the volleyball court. The volleyball was a big deal in the village; the
28 RF/PF guys played volleyball time, and we would play against them and stuff. We
29 would just get our ass kicked all the time. They were so much better than any of us.

1 RV: I want to have you take some time and describe the village and what you all
2 did there, what you saw, what it smelled like, all of that. And we can do that in a bit,
3 going forward.

4 RM: They had this very nice ceremony on the volleyball court, and I mean,
5 literally on the volleyball court in that we were playing volleyball. And then they came
6 over, and I know it was going to happen, but we didn't dress for it or anything, and they
7 said, 'We're going to have the ceremony to award'—and it was me and my RTO and my
8 sergeant. And they read this really nice thing and had a certificate, you know, just like
9 we have in our country with the ribbons showing. And they read this, of course, it was
10 all in Vietnamese, and then they pinned these very nice awards on us, which I still have.

11 RV: That's really neat. Did they people clap?

12 RM: Yes, yes.

13 RV: The villagers kind of came in.

14 RM: Yes, the villagers all came around and clapped. Not very many—well, I
15 can't remember whether the major was there or not.

16 RV: I was going to ask you that.

17 RM: I don't remember. It was the only time in our entire my year there that the
18 Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry was awarded to any soldiers for valor. I think maybe the
19 major, the district advisor got the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry kind of like in American
20 units, you could be awarded the Bronze Star for service, or you could be awarded a
21 Bronze Star for valor. And of course, silver stars and above are for valor anyway, but the
22 Bronze Star—the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry with Bronze Palm was a valor award,
23 not a service award. It was for an incident, and I don't believe anyone else got that
24 during my tour. Even during the siege of Phu Nhon, none of us were awarded that; we
25 were awarded American medals for that particular incident or for that particular siege.
26 But the Vietnamese honor was something special because they saw it as valuable, and we
27 were with their unit. Maybe there was even some kind of a—might be a situation where
28 because we were on a Vietnamese operation, and we were the advisors, that we were not
29 eligible for American awards. I don't know that to be the case, but if that were an option
30 for our particular major, he would have used it in my opinion because he was very
31 jealous of our actions.

1 RV: He would have used it to not be there to snub you?

2 RM: No, he would have used it to make sure we—because he wasn't there, and he
3 was never there, I mean, he didn't go out on operations, which probably isn't wrong. I'm
4 not suggesting that it necessarily was. But I don't know, there was just a strange feeling
5 about that, but we were pretty proud. It was a good day; it was a good day in the life of a
6 junior officer.

7 RV: Sure, it sounds like it. Let me come back to the question. Did you write
8 Maxine and tell her about this incident? I mean, is it in your letters, or is this
9 something—

10 RM: I don't know the answer to that.

11 RV: This is special.

12 RM: Yeah, and I wrote a lot more than in some of the review of letters that we're
13 going through right now, I wrote a lot more things down than I remembered writing. I
14 sort of had a memory of sanitizing everything, and I now find that I didn't sanitize as
15 much as I thought, in the case of one of the—of another incident. So I assume that I
16 probably did. I know we talked about it when we went on R&R in January; I told her all
17 about it. I can remember having that discussion, and I even remember telling her about
18 the B40 not going off. And it wasn't the first time, I mean, I'd had it happen on a jeep.

19 RV: Bounced off your windshield.

20 RM: Yeah, yeah, and this one bounced off a tree.

21 RV: It's amazing.

22 RM: Well, it is, except that I think, and talking with other soldiers and their
23 experiences with the B40 rocket launcher, I don't know if it's a matter—I don't know,
24 and probably I knew it at the time, maybe one of my ordinance guys would have figured
25 it out, but it's possible that it was a malfunction of the firing mechanism of the B40
26 rocket launcher rather than with the RPG itself.

27 RV: Right, there was a faulty launch basically.

28 RM: Yeah, exactly. When the pin, firing pin came forward, it didn't connect.
29 And I think what happens, now remember this is NVA, so they should have had a better
30 handle on their resources, their assets than would have been the VC, but you know, you
31 don't know how long those guys have been out. They may have been two, three weeks

1 out, and they may have gotten wet, you know the rocket may have gotten wet, but I think
2 it was more a function of the launcher itself. We captured the rocket launcher, and of
3 course, captured all these things. Captured rocket launcher, I kept that in my hooch, and I
4 have pictures of that on my wall in my video. We captured, I put the B40 rocket launcher
5 on my gun—had a big gun rack, and I had an SKS on there, and I had this B40, and I had
6 an AK-47 and all these things. But the pistol that he carried—

7 RV: Did you disarm him pretty quickly?

8 RM: Yeah.

9 RV: Okay.

10 RM: I don't remember doing it myself. I think someone else did. I took, and will
11 give to the archives here as an artifact, the pistol, the scabbard, the holster, and the belt,
12 the gun belt that it was attached to, and the cigarette lighter. Those were the souvenir
13 relics that I took and brought home.

14 RV: When did you take them off of him? Was it—

15 RM: Right then. I think as we were bandaging him up, we took his belt off.

16 RV: Felt his pockets.

17 RM: Yeah, did all that stuff. And I remember—but I remember the pistol... I
18 gave the pistol to one of these engineer platoon guys.

19 RV: One of the guys who weren't supposed to be there, but they were there?
20 When did you give it to him? Later, or was it that night?

21 RM: I don't know the answer to that, but I remember specifically thinking, 'You
22 take this.' And I don't know why exactly; there must have been some feeling on my part
23 that these guys did a good job because maybe they were more the gun collectors and
24 stuff. You could take those home; you had to file for them, and it was a really involved
25 thing, as you could take SKS home. I didn't bring any weapons home. It was, as I recall,
26 it was a hassle to bring them home. You had to do a lot of paperwork, and there were
27 rumors that when you got to Travis AFB, you had to stay an extra day or two to clear
28 them, and I didn't want to stay any extra; I wanted to go home. I don't know if that's
29 true, but I didn't bring anything like that home. Like I say, I did bring some other
30 artifacts home. But I remember thinking that one of those guys should have it, and they
31 may have even carried it for the rest of the tour. And they were still around at the end of

1 the tour; they participated in the siege of Phu Nhon. But I don't really recall that—but in
2 terms of my wife, I think, yeah, I think we talked about it a lot, and I do remember the
3 incident.

4 RV: You've described it quite vividly today. Tell me about the lasting effect of
5 this incident. You've mentioned it a couple of times that it has stayed with you. I can
6 see for obvious reasons why, but beyond that, why?

7 RV: Well, I think it sort of—this was October, so I knew I had a long time to go.
8 I was going to be there until May, May 28 was my DEROs date. And I remember
9 thinking that this is what we're supposed to do. I do remember that, and I don't ever
10 remember thinking, 'Gee whiz, I don't want to ever do this again,' and we did do it again.
11 We never had contact like that. We were never ambushed again. We went out a lot on
12 operations, so we were successful. I also don't remember having, feeling at the time that,
13 'Well, the next one might get me,' or anything like that. I don't ever remember thinking,
14 'Gee, I don't want to do this again.' In fact, maybe just the opposite. Maybe it gave me a
15 false feeling of security, as 'Damn, we're good.' The guys did good, both the Americans
16 and the RF/PF did a good job.

17 RV: You were proud of them?

18 RM: I was real proud of them, and I was proud of the fact that we gathered
19 intelligence; I was proud of the fact that we kept the guy alive. Everything worked.
20 Pardon?

21 RV: You didn't lose anyone.

22 RM: Didn't lose anyone. It was almost like this is the way it's supposed to
23 happen, and so I think, in some maybe perverse sort of way, I looked forward to doing it
24 again, the next operation. I was proud of the fact that we had stopped the ambush; I was
25 proud of the fact that we had kept him alive. I didn't know about any other deaths; we
26 pursued SEA, and we saw a lot of blood trails. And something that would be interesting,
27 and you'll appreciate this as a historian, when I was in Washington, DC, doing my
28 research for my dissertation, the archivist there, Rich Boylan who is kind of a friend of
29 this place, and he took my wife and I on a tour of the archives in the back rooms, which I
30 guess is unusual, but anyway, it was nice. And he said, 'What unit were you in?' and I
31 told him, 'MAT team'—or, 'Province team 36, Mobile Advisory Team 38, Pleiku,' and

1 all this stuff, and he walked us into this archive, and he pointed up, and he said, 'There's
2 all the Mobile Advisory Team 38 things from 1967,' I believe is when they first started,
3 'all the way to 1972. Your After-Action reports are right there.'

4 RV: Wow, wow.

5 RM: He said, 'You want me to pull them?' And I said, 'No.' I said, 'If I get into
6 that now, I'll never do what I'm supposed to do on this trip.' I said, 'Someday I'm going
7 to get in there and relive these incidents, but I'm not prepared to do it right now,' so I
8 didn't. So and hopefully, if I write book two, it's going to be about this whole thing and
9 the siege of Phu Nhon and everything, and I will get into that and read them and my
10 after—because I'm sure I wrote the After-Action report. Be interesting to see if it's as
11 accurate as I'm remembering it (laughs).

12 RV: (laughs) Well, you're going to best you can, I mean, honestly. You
13 mentioned you had some regret about this gentleman, this officer, and you didn't really
14 mention specifically what that was about, or you weren't sure what that was about.

15 RM: Well, he's an officer. I hope that he made it; I hope that he was put into a
16 POW camp, or I hope that he became a Chieu Hoy. He was an officer; he was a junior
17 officer just like me.

18 RV: He was like you.

19 RM: But my guess is he had fought, had been in the Army a lot longer than I had.
20 I don't recall that I saw his wallet or his identification. I mean, I may have, but I don't
21 recall that I did. And I would like to know in some way that he made it, that we
22 somehow kept him alive, but I don't know that to be the case. But I have, still to this day,
23 I have a lot of respect for the NVA soldiers because I think they were very good soldiers,
24 and I think this guy was probably part of the scout team that was out there. He was
25 probably the platoon leader of the scout team. And you know, he was probably a long
26 ways from home, and so, you know, I hope that he, I hope that he made it, and that their,
27 you know, I mean, their Army won, you know, ultimately. And who knows, I assume he
28 probably never went back to his unit.

29 RV: Probably not.

30 RM: If he was a POW. And who knows, the Vietnamese, the South Vietnamese
31 POW camps were pretty rough, so he may not have made it. But he was alive; we saved

1 his life after trying to take it. And hopefully we got some intelligence from him, although
2 the interesting thing is too, that's the only contact I ever had with the NVA—or, to my
3 knowledge, in my memory, none of us ever had another contact with the NVA until
4 March of 1971, almost six months later. So I don't know for sure what we learned, but
5 maybe we learned that they're not there and that how this scout team was kind of there, I
6 don't know.

7 RV: I would think that the intelligence officers, the people that were interrogating
8 him tried to ascertain his identification.

9 RM: Yes.

10 RV: And it's probably in some reports somewhere.

11 RM: That's what I'm thinking. And it bothers me a little bit that I don't know
12 more about what we found out on the intelligence. It's almost as if—I mean, because I'm
13 assuming that someone told me something, and I have forgotten it, so it's almost as if I
14 was the infantry, I did my job, now you guys do yours, and we'll go do something else.
15 And why wasn't my curiosity greater to have wanted to know the big picture on what we
16 did?

17 RV: How old were you then?

18 RM: 25.

19 RV: But you've already said, you're not thinking that big picture. I mean, you're
20 25 years old, you're a junior officer, you've done an excellent job out on an operation,
21 you're back, you're alive, everybody's good, you're drinking beer with your buddies, and
22 like you said, it seems like when you described that incident to me just as an observer, it
23 seemed like here you were, you'd done your job, and you guys were rewarding yourself
24 with some beer and some laughs and some conversation. Not laughing about, you know,
25 hitting the guy or anything, and then you've passed him to the next stage of experience.

26 RM: I guess my curiosity is more of a recent thing perhaps because I don't ever
27 remember thinking too much about it even in the last few years—I mean, in the last few
28 years I've thought about it a lot, but in the ensuing years between when I came home and
29 about six years ago, I don't remember, other than the incidents fresh in my mind, but the
30 outcome of it is not. It was never a curiosity for me that I would pursue it. So I may
31 someday, but it was quite a day.

1 RV: Sounds like it. How old was this guy do you think?

2 RM: I'm going to guess late teens, early 20s. I mean, he looked, I can still see his
3 face so clearly. I think he—and the amazing thing is that I don't remember him being in
4 great anguish.

5 RV: You almost describe him as serene, calm.

6 RM: Yes, absolutely.

7 RV: Except on his face.

8 RM: And I'm trying to think whether we—I don't know whether we used
9 morphine. We all carried the little small breakable protein morphine pieces that you
10 break, and then you jam them into your thigh. We may have done that. I didn't, but one
11 of my men may have done that, and that may have—but even when we first got to him,
12 when we first saw him down, I don't remember him particularly—it was almost like he
13 had a, not a grin, but sort of a grin on his face. That's strange, but.... But it's the only
14 time in my tour that we captured an enemy, that my unit did. Oh, now and then we'd go
15 into a village, and the PSDF would have captured some guy the night before and that
16 kind of stuff, but the only time I was ever involved myself. And it did form a lasting
17 impression, and like I say, to this day I don't understand when Vietnam veterans try to
18 make the case, whether it's true or not, and I hope it's not, that there were all these
19 executions of prisoners, we didn't have time for it and stuff like that. And I'm thinking,
20 'Man, that's what you're out there for, is find out stuff, that's part of the operation.'

21 RV: Right.

22 RM: And I can't imagine any officer allowing that to happen, so I usually
23 discount it, and I'm sure, like you say, you've talked to veterans that will admit to that
24 kind of stuff. It's makes it no—

25 RV: It's rare, it's rare.

26 RM: Well, I'm glad to know it's rare because it makes no military sense at all.

27 RV: Was there a reaction on this guy's face when the other guy, Pierce I guess
28 you said, pulled out his knife?

29 RM: I don't recall that there was; I think it was just an overreaction on my part. I
30 should have known better than to yell like that because I knew Pierce, but I was worried
31 that maybe—I didn't know him real well. If it had happened six months later after I

1 really got to know these guys, I would have never said it because I knew the kind of guys
2 they were. They were warriors, and I think the picture taking and stuff of the bodies and
3 stuff was just their way of, you know, it was just what they did. It wasn't—I've never
4 considered that kind of activity to be of the same atrocity kind of thing. The defamation
5 of bodies is bad and all that stuff within our culture, but it's not a big deal with me. I
6 don't put it in the same category as taking the life of somebody that's down. But I did
7 overreact. I remember using Calley's name because see Calley was March of '68, but we
8 didn't know about it until October '69.

9 RV: It's fresh right there.

10 RM: And it's fresh, and we had been told about it in OCS. They talked about it in
11 our training when I went to Special Forces, Ft. Bragg thing, we talked about all of that,
12 and it was really fresh in my mind. And so I didn't want that to happen, and I just saw
13 that knife come out, and I thought, 'Whoa.'

14 RV: Here we go.

15 RM: And I think it was also a matter of, this is weird to think, but I think it was
16 also a matter of this guy was just doing his job. This NVA soldier was doing what we're
17 doing. We're out hunting him, he's hunting us, and he got the first shot in, and we've
18 just got the second shot in. So it's over, it's over for him.

19 RV: Right.

20 RM: Doesn't have to be anymore over than that; it's over for him, and we've got
21 him, let's see what he knows. But I don't remember anger. I don't remember being mad
22 at him at all.

23 RV: Did that surprise you at the time?

24 RM: I don't know, I don't know. Even to this day I don't think of war that way. I
25 don't even remember when things got really rough later on that in any combat situation I
26 ever felt any hatred. I almost remember thinking I wish I did.

27 RV: Really?

28 RM: Yeah, it would be easier.

29 RV: You could see the humanity in what was happening.

30 RM: Well, I could see what they are being asked to do; it's exactly what my
31 country was asking me to do. I have great respect for them as soldiers. Less so for the

1 VC, like I say, because I think they were a little cheating a little bit by hiding it, shooting
2 at night, and I'm sure the NVA did that, too, but it was different with the NVA; it was
3 different with them. They were a long ways from home. These VC guys, they got to live
4 in the village at night and pretend they were somebody else. Safer deal. These NVA
5 boys, they had come down from the north, and they maybe had been there a long time,
6 and their country was saying, you know, 'Let's kick the Americans out.' And they were
7 dedicated to do it.

8 RV: Maybe his grin or his smile that you kind of remember seeing that, maybe he
9 was acknowledging, 'It's over for me.'

10 RM: I've thought about that.

11 RV: 'My war's done.'

12 RM: Exactly. A million dollar wound. If he was confident that he wasn't going
13 to die, and I don't know whether not ever having been wounded like that, I don't know
14 whether you know that you have a life-threatening wound, and maybe even that maybe
15 our reaction to him was such that he felt that he would be taken care of. Now he may
16 have changed his mind when we turned him over to the Vietnamese, I don't know, I don't
17 know.

18 RV: Ron, tell me about the Medevacs. We hear so much about them, their
19 bravery, the fact they would come in really under any circumstances to take out
20 American and ally wounded and even the enemy wounded. What was your impression of
21 them?

22 RM: Well, on this case, they weren't in any danger, but yeah, what I know about
23 them mostly is based on my experiences later in the siege of Phu Nhon, they were
24 absolutely terrific. Not just the Medevacs but the resupply choppers and everything that
25 brought stuff into us, they were great. And you know, I'll tell you another interesting
26 thing about the Medevacs is you've interviewed a lot of men, and you probably know
27 more about this than I do, but I don't remember the Medevacs being unarmed. Did they
28 tell you that?

29 RV: They usually have weapons with them.

30 RM: Exactly.

1 RV: They usually have a sidearm or something in the cockpit, saw, shotgun,
2 something.

3 RM: But see my memory is that they had door gunners, and that's against the
4 Geneva Convention and all that kind of stuff, with that great big ol' cross on the front.
5 But I remember that at the siege of Phu Nhon, when they came in to Medevac my good
6 friend Ed out, I thought they had door gunners. I can't imagine coming in without a door
7 gunner.

8 RV: They did have door gunners. Not everyone did, but I think maybe
9 circumstances and perhaps the pilots' own personal predilections said, 'Hey, you know I
10 want a door gunner.'

11 RM: Absolutely. Yes.

12 RV: If I went into a hot zone—

13 RM: Hot LZ and all this stuff. I mean, I know it's against the Geneva Convention
14 but so was shooting at a helicopter with a cross on it.

15 RV: Yes, and perhaps, I also know their experiences have been that it didn't
16 matter if they had a cross on their helicopter; they're completely shot at.

17 RM: Right.

18 RV: And not all of them all the time had the Cobra escorts.

19 RM: Yeah, well, and the only reason I'm saying it because I remember I was at an
20 air show in Angel Fire, and there were some Huey choppers there. And we were talking
21 to this guy, and there was one guy there that was a Vietnam veteran. He says, 'Of course,
22 in Vietnam, we didn't have the door gunners,' and I didn't want to challenge him.

23 RV: On Hueys?

24 RM: On Hueys, yeah. And I got to thinking later, 'Man, the guy's I knew did,'
25 and maybe it was just a function of being late in the war like that and not having
26 American units around to protect them. I can even—maybe what they did was take the
27 guns off when they landed at the hospital in Pleiku (laughs). I mean, I'm sure nobody
28 will admit to having been a door gunner on a Medevac, but they had to have medics on
29 there, right?

30 RV: They did.

31 RM: So the medics were just going to sit in a chair?

1 RV: They had a crew back there who would—had to get the person onto the, or
2 the people, onto the chopper, medically take care of them, and provide for a safe exit,
3 basically.

4 RM: Right, right.

5 RV: Now, I've heard from dust-off pilots where they don't describe any kind of
6 door gunners or anything. They come in, they get the wounded, and they go. Whether
7 they're leaving out the fact that they might have had someone with an M16 standing
8 there, you know, one guy's going to get the body on, the people on, the other guy's going
9 to be laying down firing.

10 RM: Yeah, but I guess I don't know either, but my memory is—but yeah, they
11 were some special kind of people. But all of the pilots were, my goodness. Even a Cobra
12 gunship with all of its armament, they were just so vulnerable. Once you're in, you're
13 vulnerable to anti-aircraft weapons, you're vulnerable to any M50—.50-cals easy to
14 come down on a Cobra, and even in the Huey, the troop transportations, you know, they
15 were just subjected to all that stuff. B40s on a hot LZ can take one down so easily. So I
16 had a lot of respect for those guys, a lot of respect.

17 RV: You could rely on them?

18 RM: Oh, yeah. Yeah, oh, my goodness, yes. I don't ever remember in the few
19 times that I called in air support, and it was always, except for one incident, it was always
20 Cobra gunships. I only called in F4s once, and that was later in my tour. But the Cobras
21 really—I don't ever remember them being late. I don't ever remember being frustrated
22 because I couldn't get them in; they were always right there, 15 minutes from Pleiku.
23 Boom, had them on sight.

24 RV: That had to instill some kind of, maybe an unconscious confidence.

25 RM: Oh, my goodness.

26 RV: That you knew that the dust-off guys would be there, you knew the Cobras
27 would be there, you knew that.

28 RM: Going out. Absolutely. What a sight to see them work.

29 RV: What did it sound like? What did that day sound like? As you were
30 describing, you know, you say you heard the click, and the thing—

1 RM: Small arms. Then small arms, AKs. The higher pitch sound of an AK-47
2 then an M16. Didn't last very long.

3 RV: The AKs or the whole small arms?

4 RM: Well, no, the AKs. Then we laid down a lot of fire; we were M16, and then
5 the thump guns, M79s. We got those out there, you know, and then cease fire. I yelled,
6 'Cease fire,' and we didn't hear anything else, except this great guy screaming. And
7 some running, I mean, I heard, not real loud, but we heard the exiting sounds of the
8 soldiers, of the NVA soldiers. That's why we knew there were a bunch of them, but not a
9 whole bunch because they would have stayed and fought. That's the way I looked at it.
10 This is a company-size ambush; it's not over.

11 RV: Right, they're setting up, somehow.

12 RM: Yes, they know where they are. We don't know where we are. That was the
13 other thing I remember is while I was down with this guy, I'm kneeling down with him
14 and everything, I remember pretty much knowing exactly where we are to call in that
15 artillery, and that still amazes me to this day. I'm pretty good with directions and things
16 like that, but I'm not necessarily a guy that will keep my nose in a map, even when I'm
17 on the highway. So I don't recall how I had so much confidence to call in the artillery.

18 RV: When you're walking back in, or I guess walking out or walking anywhere,
19 are you thinking to yourself, 'Okay, I just left these coordinates, now I'm going to enter
20 in these coordinates.'? Just left this one—

21 RM: No, I think, I think what I'm thinking is I know pretty much, you sort of
22 rehearse the operation, and you do it, I used to do it by natural landmarks- streams and
23 rises in the terrain, and you know, you have topo maps, so you know when you're going
24 up, you know when you're coming down. But I remember being pretty sure of where I
25 was. First rounds were mark rounds, so that helps a little bit, and then you know, fire
26 for effect and bringing the rest of it in, so once the first is launched, the first round gets
27 close to where you are. But calling in artillery was a special skill that I hadn't had a lot
28 of experience with, and so you know, adjusting and all that kind of stuff, I don't
29 remember that we had to do a lot of adjusting. And it's also possible that my platoon
30 sergeant may have done that. My memory is not as vivid on that as to how I—for sure. I
31 do know that I called in the Medevac, and I called in the Cobras, so it may be that I

1 wasn't adjusting, that I didn't call in the artillery. It may have been my guy that did it.

2 Or even my RTO, they were really good. Rodriguez, he was good.

3 RV: What do the Cobras sound like when they're coming in and landing fire?

4 RM: Oh, boy, I'll tell you what.

5 RV: Are you down, I mean, are you covering your head? Artillery starts coming,
6 are you guys getting down?

7 RM: First round you hear it coming in, and it wasn't even that far away. We were
8 probably six or seven clicks away from Phu Nhon, so it's not that far, and so the rounds
9 came very quickly. And they were, I'm trying to think, I don't remember whether they
10 were 105s or 155s that we used. Most likely 105s because we were really close, but we
11 had 155s there, too. But the Cobras, the thing that was always interesting to me is when
12 they'd come in, they'd work, and they had 40 mm, you know 40 mm grenade launchers,
13 essentially like you're firing from an M79. So you've got a delay, you've got fire,
14 you've got a hit, and then you've got an explosion. And then they also had miniguns, and
15 I don't remember the caliber; I assume they were 762 miniguns that would work the area
16 also. But I remember that the really neat thing was when they'd come in, and they'd light
17 it up, and then they'd make those turns, you know, they come back around for that
18 second pass. They were really something. And then of course, talking to them (imitates
19 Cobra riders' voices), you know, that's their--

20 RV: That's what they're sounding like.

21 RM: Yeah, that's what they're sounding like because you got the things right here
22 (imitates again), and that's the sound that you're hearing on the other end. And you
23 know, they would let you know whether they saw something or didn't see something, and
24 I was always kind of cynical about—I thought once they're on sight, they're seeing
25 something (laughs), even if they're not.

26 RV: Right.

27 RM: Because that's what they do, you know. And I suppose that it's particularly
28 neat when you're pretty confident that you have the—that you're not going to be in
29 defense. You're going to truly be on offense, and I think they were most of the time.
30 That particular day, I think they were having a lot of fun. Now, later on in my tour when
31 we talk about the siege, it won't be fun for them, and they will really be in it. But that

1 particular day, I think it was one of those perfect operations in the sense that, you know,
2 we did our job, they did their job, and there was not a lot of danger for them at that
3 moment, nor was there a lot of danger for us once the scout team was out of there.

4 RV: The sounds of battle, then, are varying on the weaponry, obviously, and the
5 distance from what's happening out there, but it's—I can only assume it's loud.

6 RM: Yeah, but this one was so short that it wasn't. When we talk about the siege,
7 it's really loud. Oh, my goodness, you know, my hearing today is still affected by it kind
8 of thing. It was really bad. And I don't remember even in this case the smells of battle
9 because there was no death. There were no rotting corpses or any of that kind of stuff.
10 So I don't—that doesn't stick in my mind about that operation. The operation I just
11 described to you is, like I say, the perfect operation; it's what you would hope all
12 operations would be but aren't. Everything went right, and so that's a good feeling;
13 that's a good memory of having done everything that you could do. That's not what war
14 mostly is. And so had I come home with only that memory, I would probably be much
15 like some of those warriors who sat behind a desk in Saigon for their tour and have a
16 positive memory of battle that they never took part in, but they can imagine that they did,
17 while I really did take part in that, and everything worked perfectly. That's not a healthy
18 memory of war because that's not what war is, and I would find out what war really is in
19 a few months.

20 RV: Why don't we wrap up for today?

21 RM: Okay. Good.

22 RV: Thanks, Ron.