

Interview with Ron Milam
Session 4 of 7
August 23, 2005

1 Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I'm continuing my oral history
2 interview with Ron Milam. Ron and I are, again, in Lubbock, Texas in the Vietnam
3 Archive interview room on the campus of Texas Tech University. Today is August 23,
4 2005, and it's about 1:25 pm Central Standard time. Ron, in our last session, we had
5 talked about the ceremony that you went through with becoming a member of this Jarai
6 tribe and that it was pretty rigorous on the system, and I wanted to kind of get more of an
7 overlay of that area in which you were operating. And starting with your compound, you
8 had described it kind of as a horseshoe shaped compound, and you had kind of detailed
9 already what's in there. But if you could go back through that and lay that out. This is
10 the base from which you will operate.

11 Ron Milam: That's correct. It was essentially a horseshoe with the opening of the
12 horseshoe being Highway 14. As my tour gets started, there was a completely opening
13 on the horseshoe, and later on we would close the horseshoe, so that it was almost more
14 of a circle, for defensive purposes. And later in my tour, that was a good thing to do
15 because we had an incident, attempted overrun through the opening. But the compound
16 was set up; it was really the District Headquarters for Phu Nhon District. There were
17 several districts within Pleiku province, and the compound on the inside was the
18 organization of the RF/PF, ruff-puffs, that would have had their own company
19 commanders and their battalion commanders and all of that kind of an organization. We
20 were an advisory team; it was Advisory Team 36, which was—and then within that
21 advisory team, there were two, what we call MAT teams, Mobile Advisory Teams. And
22 I was the assistant team leader of Mobile Advisory Team 38. The organization—I don't
23 remember if I talked about the organization, the MAT Mobile Advisory Teams, but it was
24 a captain, a lieutenant, two officers, and then a heavy weapons, a light weapons and the
25 medic on each team. And we were advisors to these ruff-puffs, in addition we were
26 advisors to what were called the PSDF or the Peoples Self-Defense Forces, which were
27 almost all Montagnards. In fact, the PSDF were 100 percent Montagnards. The ruff-
28 puffs not necessarily because they would be whatever organizationally they had going for

1 them, in terms of if there were Vietnamese living in that area. But it was a predominant
2 Montagnard Jarai in our area.

3 RV: And these individuals, obviously the ruff-puffs, but the PSDF forces would
4 also live inside the compound?

5 RM: The PSDF actually lived in the adjacent villages. It was the ruff-puffs with
6 their families who actually had locations on the horseshoe perimeter of the Phu Nhon
7 District Headquarters.

8 RV: Were they specifically put on the perimeter?

9 RM: Yes, they lived on the perimeter, and their families lived with them on the
10 perimeters. Inside the compound, there was really two different locations, you might say.
11 Inside the compound you had the command post of the ruff-puffs, the district chief, and
12 then you would also have our American advisory team right in the center of the whole
13 thing. And we had a, I guess you could call it, it was kind of a Quonset hut reinforced
14 with sandbags, both tops and sides and everything else. But it was known to be, it was
15 the military and governmental and civil organization that ran the Phu Nhon district.

16 RV: What was the reason—I want to run through both of the groups that you were
17 advising—what was the reason for putting the ruff-puff families and folks there on the
18 perimeter? Was that specific?

19 RM: It was to protect the district headquarters. As my year unfolded, in the
20 beginning I don't recall that we had as much perimeter defense as we did towards the
21 middle of my tour and certainly towards the end. From the time I got there in I guess
22 early July of '70, it appeared to me, personally, and to the new—and I think in November
23 we had a change of command and got a new district advisor—it appeared that the defense
24 was not sufficient. The 4th Division controlled the Phu Nhon district at Pleiku province
25 until October of 1970 when they left; they were completely gone. They started their
26 withdrawal, I believe, in May or June of 1970. By fall of 1970, the intelligence that we
27 were starting to get from NVA probe scout teams, and these were, for the last six months,
28 I would say, of the 4th Division's tour, most of the enemy contact was with Viet Cong
29 units. By the fall, we were starting to get probes from NVA scout teams. Intelligence
30 was that the NVA ultimately would locate—would centralize their efforts in that region.
31 Once the 4th was out, they would be able to come back in essentially. And so that

1 intelligence told us that Phu Nhon would be a target. The history of the Vietnam War is
2 that that area was very sensitive anyway, going back to Plei Me in '65 and every place
3 else. So Phu Nhon would be a target; we felt very confident of that, so we started
4 almost—by September of 1970 we started to reinforce everything. The bunker systems,
5 the airfield that we had behind for headhunter activities for the Cessna 172s that we used
6 for operations, we started to beef up the compound in all respects.

7 RV: And when you say 'we', you mean—

8 RM: Well, the advisors advised the Regional Forces and Popular Forces to begin
9 reinforcements of all of the compound, the backside particularly. The front side didn't
10 seem to be as important because on the front side, it essentially butted up against
11 Highway 14, and there was maybe 100 yard movement between the road and where the
12 compound started. But even there we started laying minefields. Closed that horseshoe, it
13 was wide open. There was a 90-degree entrance off of Highway 14 coming into our
14 compound, and then there was a large single-wide, I guess you'd call it, trailer that was
15 the living quarters of the district advisor. And my team immediately, we took it upon
16 ourselves as our Mobile Advisory Team to build an elevated bunker on top of that
17 singlewide. And we spent six months building it in our spare time. Ultimately it would
18 be one of the things that saved the compound when we almost got overrun. But we start
19 immediately, I mean in October. It was like as soon as you came in that main drag, you
20 could look up and see this singlewide sitting there, and the main man was living in it, and
21 there was no reinforcement other than some low-level sandbags. There was not even
22 anything on top of the trailer; not even any sandbag on top. And it was crazy because we
23 would get mortared a lot, and we had sandbags on top of all of our sleeping quarters, we
24 had them on top of our NCO area. We had them all around everywhere, but we didn't
25 have them on that thing, so we thought, 'Well, if we're going to do this anyway, why
26 don't we just build a first class fighting bunker?' Elevated fighting bunker with good
27 fields of fire and everything across it. So that's what we did.

28 RV: What were the materials you used?

29 RM: Sandbags, big six by six, well, we built—we started out with a 55 gallon
30 drum; we'd take our diesel fuel drums as they were empty, and we filled those with
31 sands, and we built those up, so we had maybe five or six high of those.

1 RV: This is on the top of the—

2 RM: No, these started on the sides. And then when we got to the top, we came up
3 the side, and then on top of that we'd put six by six reinforced—gee whiz, six by six?
4 Yeah, six by six coming out of the barrels all the way up, and then we put a tin roof on
5 top of that, and then sandbagged on top of that tin roof, so that we had an elevated
6 fighting bunker. It was terrific; it was a great, great thing.

7 RV: Did you all have to get permission to do this, or when you moved in and
8 you're the American leaders—I mean, you essentially are the American leaders.

9 RM: We were the American leaders, and I was—I don't know how long the
10 Mobile Advisory Team 38 had operated in Phu Nhon district, and there was another
11 advisory team, and I've forgotten their number right now. So, there were two advisory
12 teams and then an advisory, what they call the District Team 36, which was essentially a
13 major, an intelligence officer, and RTO, so there's maybe three or four of them. And
14 then the Mobile Advisory Teams were two teams of five. So we had about 16 total
15 people. How long they had been there until I got there, I don't know. I assume two or
16 three years. In terms of permission to do what we were doing, I didn't ever ask for
17 permission; I assume that somebody did. I think the major that was in charge whose
18 singlewide we were fixing to protect probably was happy with it. I assume somebody
19 thought it was an okay idea to put it up there because it was a terrific fighting bunker.

20 RV: This might seem like a very simplistic question, but how did you know how
21 to build it?

22 RM: Well, it's a good question because I don't remember that we sat down and
23 diagrammed it. I think we just finally said, 'Hey, wouldn't it be good to have something
24 there? What have we got around?' There was a lumberyard not too far away that was
25 operating, so we could get our six by sixes from them. And we just set to do it, and it just
26 seemed that when I got there, it seemed like that was missing. There was not a good
27 fighting location. Whenever we got hit, when we got mortared, we went into defensive
28 positions within inside the compound which was fine for that kind of an attack, if all you
29 were getting hit with was rockets and mortars. But if you ever had to sustain a ground
30 attack, it would be virtually impossible. We had no place to fight from. We had good
31 areas of observation; we even had right in the middle of the compound, we had our

1 latrine facility and showers, and on top of that of course we would have a water blivot
2 that we had to go to the stream and fill every couple of days, and I think it held, I don't
3 know, 50—no, no, 250 or 300 gallons or something. So we had an observation tower
4 associated with that, so we could stand up there and look, but we couldn't fight from
5 there because anybody could take a shot at you, and it was in the internal. This thing that
6 we were building was on the external part; boy, it was right out there. And so we could
7 put a minefield out there, we could put concertina wire out there, and that was kind of
8 closing the horseshoe that I described.

9 RV: Okay, if you're attacking this, and you see this bunker go up, you're
10 observing this, and you see the mines out, so you assume this is going to be a very
11 difficult position to really penetrate, why don't you attack from somewhere else around
12 the other side of the horseshoe?

13 RM: And they did. Ultimately they would attack, they would put on an 360-
14 degree attack, and the armor, what there was of it, not much APC, would come up the
15 road because that's what armor, usually it's easier to put tanks out that way. And they
16 would come right up the road, and they were put in the best firing position right in front
17 of that bunker. But this bunker was—we used it a lot. Over the year's time, we only had
18 one ground attack in my year, but we used it every time, from the time that it was
19 completed, every time we were hit with anything, we'd go into that bunker, and we'd be
20 able to look out and get a pretty good view of the front as far as the roadway and that sort
21 of thing. It was the ruff-puffs, though, on the backside that had to protect us from
22 anything on that side. There was also on the—I'm describing the horseshoe as if the
23 opening would be looking due west with Highway 14 running north/south. The backside
24 on what I would call the south side of the horseshoe, we ultimately put a United States
25 Artillery Battery, probably, I guess it was a company-sized battery. And so they would
26 become a target also.

27 RV: So, it's shaped—basically I'm drawing on the paper here just to let people
28 know. Directions north, south, east, west.

29 RM: Highway 14.

30 RV: 14 is running here and—

1 RM: The bunker that I've been describing would sit about right there, and the
2 artillery battery ultimately located down here, and their job was to try to protect.
3 Highway 14 was a road that had to be kept open for commerce and everything else
4 between Pleiku and Ban Me Thuot. And this artillery battery was an American artillery
5 battery, and they were assigned, they were sort of there to protect an engineering
6 battalion that's responsibility was to keep Highway 14 constructed, first of all, and then
7 secured. And that is morning mine sweeping and that sort of thing because there was a
8 lot of civilian traffic that ran north and south between Pleiku and Ban Me Thuot.

9 RV: Can you describe the basic dimensions here of this compound? What is the
10 opening?

11 RM: This would probably be—it's probably 200 to 300 yards across here and
12 probably half a mile back here with a runway back here, running parallel to the highway.
13 A dirt runway for the C172 Headhunter units that would come in and help us do—
14 (coughs) excuse me—help us do scouting. And then there was a helipad right here for all
15 of our resupply. During the one big contact that we had, this was no longer used, so we
16 had to land inside the compound. And then this was a big open area in here, which was
17 like there were actually buildings, Vietnamese buildings that they used to run the
18 government of Phu Nhon.

19 RV: So, let me just describe this for the people who can't see this. On the
20 opening end, the western side of this you had the helipad was outside of the compound,
21 just outside.

22 RM: It was just outside of it, yes.

23 RV: Was there like a front gate here?

24 RM: Yes, there was a gate.

25 RV: Okay, so you have a 90-degree off of Highway 14 that comes in. Where the
26 fighting bunker you all built of the singlewide, was in—

27 RM: On the left side of the highway coming in.

28 RV: Yes, on the south side of the highway, on the south side of the entranceway,
29 entrance road.

30 RM: No, it's on the north side. This is the artillery compound, so it's actually—
31 it's sits—the bunker that I've been describing sits right there.

1 RV: Sits right there at the gate on the north side of your entrance, and the artillery,
2 was it inside also?

3 RM: It was outside; they had their own compound essentially.

4 RV: I see.

5 RM: With guns aimed, well, really, their guns were in a situation where this was
6 the road that they were protecting, so their guns, the idea being that if they ever had any
7 contact, they would have to protect this area. But quite frankly, during a lot of the
8 contacts, they were lowered; they got hit as hard as we did, and they were essentially
9 firing point blank. That's what they used them for. And then our building where we
10 slept was inside right in here. We had a building here, and we had a building here.

11 RV: And this is inside?

12 RM: Inside the whole—

13 RV: The large—

14 RM: Perimeter. And then this perimeter would be all bunkers with families, men,
15 women and children with their husband being the soldier, all the way around.

16 RV: This is the east side or the backside of the horseshoe?

17 RM: Yes.

18 RV: Okay, and your living quarters are in this large open area?

19 RM: Yeah, we had Quonset hut-type things.

20 RV: What's in the rest of the horseshoe area here?

21 RM: It was open to a certain extent. I'm trying to think; this was outside of the
22 compound, I would say there were buildings, there were a lot of different buildings in this
23 area. Now what were they for? There was an armory, there was a planning, like
24 government offices, and all the political infrastructure was within this whole compound.

25 RV: When you say buildings, what kind of materials?

26 RM: They're made out of, it's almost like adobe-looking stuff. I don't know what
27 their name for it was, but it was what we would think of as being like adobe here.

28 RV: I'm nodding because I've seen them when I was over there; I've seen these
29 structures. It's not a concrete, it's not clay per se, but it's something in between.

30 RM: Yes, yes.

1 RV: Initially, as an amateur looking at this and as a civilian looking at this, there's
2 a lot of trust involved between, you know, you guys are mainly focused up toward the
3 opening, towards Highway 14, and you've got, basically your back is to, if you're
4 looking out towards Highway 14, your back is to where the ruff-puffs.

5 RM: Absolutely.

6 RV: I mean, tell me about that relationship. You said there were 16—

7 RM: It's also, our back is also to what would ultimately be a free-fire zone, and
8 virtually everything to the, to one to two miles off of the Highway 14 back east, all the
9 way up to Pleiku, from Phu Nhon to Pleiku, was free-fire zone. It was considered that
10 anyone out in that area was VC.

11 RV: Explain, well, you just did, but in a little more detail, free-fire zones because
12 that's a point of comment.

13 RM: Exactly, exactly. The United States government determined that early on, I
14 would say, probably within the first year of operations after March of '65 when ground
15 troops were brought in, the United States government determined that the best way to
16 protect the good guys, if you will, the Vietnamese or the Montagnards who were
17 supporting the South Vietnamese government, that'd be our efforts, too, would be to
18 move the people from their locations, from their ancestral homes, to more secure areas.
19 That would by definition be along highways where the United States and its South
20 Vietnamese allies could protect the people better. So we did that, and part of those
21 efforts were to move the people to the road. My team was still doing that even in 1970,
22 but a lot of it was done in '67, '68, '69, so this would have been 4th Division efforts to
23 move the people into more secure areas. Now, I have some problems with that, with the
24 way that was done in terms of a military decision that was made, but it was done.

25 RV: Sure.

26 RM: After they had been moved in that area, the assumption was that anyone who
27 remained was VC or a VC sympathizer. It also made it easier if you had the confidence
28 that you had been successful in moving everyone, it made it easy to make decisions about
29 using that area; they called it a free-fire zone in the sense that anyone there would be
30 considered to be the enemy. So therefore, you could be more effective with your artillery
31 and your air support. You didn't have to worry as much about collateral damage if you

1 wanted to go against a known VC headquarter, you didn't have to worry that the local
2 village was so close because that village should have already been moved to the roadside.
3 So virtually the Phu Nhon back east area that I have described was essentially considered
4 then to be a free-fire zone, almost all the way up. Now, I can't speak too much beyond
5 the town of My Thach, which was about 10 klicks north of us. From My Thach to
6 Pleiku, I was pretty much confined to being on the road going to Pleiku, so it really
7 wasn't my OA; it was someone else's, so I don't know as you get closer to Pleiku,
8 whether that held to be the same. But I believe it was because I operated in those areas
9 on the ground, and I also flew it a lot, and I know that when we saw anything moving out
10 there, it was considered to be VC.

11 RV: Tell me about moving Vietnamese and problems with that, from the cultural
12 standpoint, as well as what you said, the military making this decision.

13 RM: The idea militarily, I suppose, is sound. That is our job is to kill VC, and we
14 don't know exactly where they are, but if we can isolate them and say, 'They're out there
15 and there's—none of our people live there,' then it makes sense to say that you can do
16 this. The problem with it was that most Montagnards didn't have a strong allegiance to
17 either the VC or certainly not to the South Vietnamese government. Montagnards
18 themselves I think were very supportive of Americans because they think Americans
19 historically had supported them in their efforts against the Vietnamese, whether they be
20 north or south. But the problem was in saying, 'Okay, we're going to move you.' We
21 would move them from their location to the roadside, and we'd try to set up a new
22 village, but those people had lived in their old area for thousands of years; Grandpa was
23 buried there. The people didn't want to move to a more secure place; they would take
24 their chances out there. And so they'd go back, so we'd move them in. Well, the first
25 thing that has to happen is you have to move them to a location, then you have to build
26 them homes, build them houses. So we had this very elaborate program of USAID who
27 would come in, and they would bring in these big sheets, big truckloads of tin, and they'd
28 build these tin-roofed hooches, which in some ways were not as comfortable as the thatch
29 roofs that they had built out there, but it was quicker to do it that way. So, you had this
30 whole process, and then they had to start life all over again living right there on the
31 highway. Well, the highway didn't bring anything to them; they were rice farmers, and

1 their rice fields were out there. Now all of a sudden they had to grow rice within 50
2 yards of the highway, and they didn't go into Pleiku and conduct commerce. That's not
3 what they did, so they had no desire to go to Ban Me Thuot to the south or to Pleiku.
4 Yes, it was more convenient and comfortable for us to secure them there than it was to
5 secure them two or three or five or six clicks in. It was a failure in my opinion, and it
6 made no sense. My own opinion is that the better way for us to have done it would have
7 been to try to secure them out there. Now that's what the Marines tried to do with the
8 CAP teams in I Corps. We were not as successful in doing that as an Army, I don't
9 believe, as the Marines were with their CAP teams.

10 RV: How much of this, and I'm addressing more the historian in you, was based
11 on successes by other countries in Southeast Asia or elsewhere, such as Thompson in
12 Malaysia?

13 RM: Thompson in Malaysia certainly was the example that Colby and Comer and
14 others, I believe, I'm trying to think here who all was involved in the very beginning, in
15 the 1962 Strategic Hamlet concepts.

16 RV: Lansdale was part of that.

17 RM: Yeah, Lansdale. The problem, I believe, is that if you study the British-
18 Malaysian experience, they had a built in ethnic hatred between the Chinese supporters at
19 the Communist side and the Malaysians. So, it was easier to do there than you had in
20 Vietnam where the, particularly in the Central Highlands, where the Montagnards—yeah
21 they hated the Vietnamese, but it wasn't a matter of saying, 'Oh, I'm going to like it over
22 here better, therefore, come on, move me.' It's still a matter of you can't duplicate what
23 people have done for thousands of years. And if warfare has been part of living anyway,
24 then the risk is, 'Okay, if I stay out there, I might die at the hands of either American
25 bombs or VC, but if you move me, I'll be miserable. So I think I'd rather stay.' And so
26 we would build these new places; we'd move the people to the—we didn't go to nearly
27 the extent that the Strategic Hamlets did with the concertina wire and the moats and
28 whole nine yards like that. And that was a failure, too. But we did move them so that we
29 could secure them, and then a month later we'd be out there saying, 'Where'd the village
30 go?' And they would have moved back, and every inhabitant in this place was gone, and

1 then we'd have to worry that they're back there, and then we had to make sure we called
2 off any artillery strikes that were going to be in the area. It was a mess, it was a mess.

3 RV: And this is in 1970.

4 RM: '70, yes. We should have known better. And I would say this: we were still
5 trying to do it without a 4th Division, without an operating infantry unit that could go out
6 and secure these villages anyway, out there or here or anywhere else. We were 15
7 Americans. So, I don't consider it to have been a success. On the other hand, I would
8 say that what we did on a daily basis where we went into the villages that were already
9 located along Highway 14, certainly Phu Nhon, My Thach, Plei Djereng on the south and
10 other names that I have forgotten up and down the highway, those villages were pretty
11 secure and pretty pacified, to use that word, and I measured them that way. We had a
12 very elaborate measurement process for determining whether the district was pacified—
13 or whether the village was pacified. And I think reasonably so, along with previously
14 established villages, but in terms of trying to be successful in building new ones, I don't
15 think we did a very good job. I was going back and looking at some of my old videos—
16 or, some of my old super eights that I shot of these movements, and I shot a lot of the
17 movements- bringing the people in, it showed us building the new places, and us out
18 serving soup in the rain so that these people could get their new buildings up, and the
19 chickens, bringing their chickens in, and their pigs and everything. And they don't look
20 real happy. We as Americans look reasonably satisfied, but the Montagnards that are
21 being moved don't look real happy. And I don't know whether that's me telepathically
22 looking at it or not, but as I look back, the video is kind of describing faces that in
23 retrospect, when I think about it, were not very happy faces.

24 RV: And just for the record, you are going to, well, for the people listening,
25 you're going to donate this stuff, so it's going to be here, so people will be able to see
26 these films.

27 RM: They will be able to see them. The process, as I understand it, is going to be
28 that I'm going to donate all the original super eights, they're going to be streamed for me
29 first, and then I will provide captioning on them and maybe narration, I don't know yet.
30 And then they should be accessible to anybody.

1 RV: Yes. So people listening to this years from now can go check these out,
2 assuming that they'll be ready years from now. Tell me about the Montagnards as almost
3 a fourth or fifth force inside this war. You've got the North and South Vietnamese, you
4 have the Americans, and you have the kind of observant and sometimes participatory
5 other countries. You've got the Australians, New Zealanders, and the South Koreans.
6 You have the Chinese and the Soviets on the other side, so you've got this international
7 component to it. But then you've got the Montagnards thrown in there as well, that their
8 allegiance is first and for most to themselves and to their family, their villages and that
9 land, then maybe like you said to the Americans or those who are—how does that play or
10 how did that complicate the effort?

11 RM: It complicated it to a significant degree. The Montagnards were the
12 indigenous peoples. There's been studies done and a lot written that the Montagnards
13 were the Native Americans of Vietnam, and the Vietnamese were the Chinese that came
14 down. I'm not enough of an anthropologist in terms of that to be able to speak as an
15 expert on it, but I can say that the Montagnards themselves did not consider themselves to
16 be part of the Vietnamese culture in any way. They had their own culture. They had, I
17 suppose some of them had fought with the French, some had fought against the French
18 depending on the geopolitical issues at that moment. But the Montagnards themselves
19 were a very private, quiet people whose interested as a people were in the preservation of
20 their own culture and in the most basic ways of life- rice farming, lumbering. And they
21 did not particularly believe that they had been treated well by the Vietnamese.
22 Americans tended—and my impression was that going back to the very earliest days of
23 American involvement in the early '60s, that when the United States put the Special
24 Forces Camps in along the Cambodian and Laotian border, the United States tended to
25 sympathize for whatever reason—and part of my future hope to study this because I still
26 don't understand it completely—but my observations at the time were that the American
27 soldier liked the Vietnamese—I mean the Montagnard soldier and vice versa. They had
28 an allegiance to Americans that I did not see with the Vietnamese, generally speaking.

29 RV: How did you see it? What were the marks of this?

30 RM: I suppose in combat as much as anything, watching them as warriors with
31 very crude instruments as I think I described in our last meeting. Very crude instruments,

1 World War II instruments that we gave them, they were better with their World War II
2 instruments, and they stayed with it more so in some ways than the Vietnamese did with
3 their M16s. Maybe it was because they truly were protecting the homeland, protecting
4 your village, where a lot of the ruff-puffs were, you know, maybe their family lived in
5 Pleiku, maybe their family lived down in Ban Me Thuot. And the ruff-puffs themselves,
6 although there were elements there certainly would have been Montagnards that were
7 part of the ruff-puffs, more of a soldier. But those that were given—mostly the PSDF—
8 that were given the responsibilities of protecting the village, did, and they did a pretty
9 good job of protecting it against VC because that was the controlling, that was
10 predominantly what was being controlled in that area. Now, would it have been the same
11 if it had been an NVA area and if they had been trying to keep South Vietnamese or
12 Americans out? I think that's a good question, and I don't have a lot of experience with
13 that because that wasn't the case in the Phu Nhon district. Very loyal, didn't particularly
14 like the RVN district chief, but liked the American advisor to the RVN district chief.
15 Was it the Americans feeling for the underdog? I don't know, I don't know, but there
16 was something about that relationship that has stayed with us even to this day. I'm sure
17 you're aware of the efforts in North Carolina with some of the old Special Forces guys to
18 save the Montagnard movement and this sort of thing, and that's a very positive thing.
19 We have some of their students here. But it's something that I think needs to be studied
20 because it was—and yet at the same time, it was the Central Highlands, it was Ban Me
21 Thuot that fell first in 1975.

22 RV: Were these observations that you were able to make then and there, or is this
23 more reflection?

24 RM: Well, it's a good question, and if you'd asked me this six weeks ago, I may
25 have said it's more reflection than it was observation that I made. But in the process of
26 this going back and looking at all of my letters and everything to make this move to
27 Lubbock, Texas, I went back and read some of my letters, and I was making those
28 observations then. It was almost scary because those memories have stayed with me, and
29 I've wondered whether I formed them now that I've studied the war academically for six
30 years, but I wrote those things home to my wife. I made it very clear who I thought the
31 winners and the losers were, who the good guys and the bad guys were, who was getting

1 it done and who wasn't. Very clear in my letters that I thought the Montagnards were
2 terrific people who were doing everything they could to protect themselves, and I didn't
3 feel the same way about the Vietnamese. If anything, my attitude towards the RVN as
4 I've read about them in other places since then as a history, my attitude towards the RVN
5 has improved beyond what I was observing 30 years ago.

6 RV: How much, looking back, how much... let me ask this more generally, when
7 Vietnam veterans who were exposed to the Montagnards and RVN and anyone kind of
8 caught in between on that fringe area geographically and socially, how did they, you or
9 them, the veterans in general, how do they come to an understanding of who they were
10 fighting for and who they were fighting with? Because you hear, well, I hear and doing
11 these interviews, so much negativity about RVN then you do hear nuggets of 'They were
12 really good; my experience was a positive one with them.' You hear a lot of more
13 positive things about the Montagnards, as you're saying here, and then people caught in
14 the middle, and some veterans put—those who've been interviewed don't talk about
15 this—put the Viet Cong in the middle, kind of also as an outsider kind of in-between
16 society. I guess, you know, reflecting and then, was there a confusion about who you
17 were allied with?

18 RM: There certainly was then. I think historically, we all get caught up in
19 everything that we've read and everything that we've heard and what we've talked to our
20 buddies who fought in another area. As I'm sure you know from all your oral histories
21 that you've done, every soldier's experiences in Vietnam was different because the
22 country was very large and areas of operations were different, problems were different.
23 If you were in an American unit, you have one opinion, and if you were in an advisory,
24 you have another one. I tend to discount a lot of the comments that a lot of American
25 veterans make about the RVN because many of them didn't have anything to do with the
26 RVN. They were assigned the 4th Division, and the 4th Division was out on operations,
27 and they hardly ever even saw an RVN. In my own research, in my own oral histories
28 that I've done and in my own questionnaires that I sent out, so many soldiers who were
29 combat experienced, I would say in my questionnaire, I'd say, 'Tell me about your
30 experiences with the RVN,' and they'd say, 'I didn't have much experience with them,
31 but they weren't any good.' Well, I think the first statement tells you a lot about what

1 they say at the end of the statement. Now as an advisor, I did have experiences with
2 both. I thought the RVN were lacking in field-grade leadership. I think they were
3 lacking in general-grade leadership, but I don't have firsthand knowledge of that because
4 that's more what I have read, what I heard, but I didn't associate with them, but I've read
5 enough about them that leads me to believe there were some leadership gaps. Field-grade
6 same thing. Company-grade, junior officers and NCOs of the RVN that I fought with
7 were pretty good. I don't have anything, generally, to say bad about them. I never saw
8 them run from a fight; I saw them stay and fight. I didn't think that the relationship
9 between them and the Montagnards in these Montagnard districts was a very good one.
10 In other words, I saw them look down upon them. And we tried to have a Thanksgiving
11 and Christmas; we invited both the Montagnards and the village chiefs in and the
12 Vietnamese, and they appeared to get along okay. But the respect was lacking; the RVN
13 didn't respect the Montagnards, and the Montagnards saw the Vietnamese as being in an
14 area they shouldn't be. And the leadership positions, the RVN were not prone to bring
15 the Montagnard people into leadership positions within the military, so most of the NCOs
16 and company-grade officers supervising Montagnard soldiers were Vietnamese. Now
17 certainly you can say, 'Well, who am I to make that judgment when my own Army was
18 white company commanders supervising black soldiers.' So yeah, we can have the same
19 kinds of ethnic issues within our own military, so I have to at least keep that in mind as I
20 say what I just said. But I think that we probably have been too critical of the actual
21 soldier himself. I think the Vietnamese soldier did a pretty good job trying to win in a
22 difficult situation. I think that the Vietnamese soldier out on the ground during combat
23 situations tried his best, but I don't think that the field-grade leadership was as good as it
24 should have been. Now, I can say the same thing about some of the field-grade
25 leadership in America, and since I wasn't part of an American unit, most of that is stuff
26 I've read more so than it is anything else.

27 RV: When you arrived out there, you did go through—I remember you saying
28 that you went through a kind of a learning period where your—the person whom you
29 replaced didn't leave immediately. They stayed on, what, I think for two weeks or so?

30 RM: Yes, yes, about that.

31 RV: Was that adequate for you, do you feel?

1 RM: I think so. With the other training that I'd had, I was pretty comfortable
2 weapon-wise, so it was more a matter of where things are. And in some ways, it was
3 maybe better that he left when he did because he was a short-timer, and he had an attitude
4 as most people do, and it just probably was best that I begin fresh. So I think it was
5 adequate.

6 RV: What was your attitude when you arrived?

7 RM: I was excited. I was ready to win that war. I certainly had been part of all of
8 the anti-war movement on the college campuses, I'd come right out of college before I
9 went in the Army, so I was, I guess, a year—I guess it was two years since I had
10 graduated from college when I got to Vietnam, but I'd paid a lot of attention to all the
11 reasons that people felt like we shouldn't be there. Once I got there, I guess I sort of
12 forgot all that and was of the opinion, in some ways, my role was almost mercenary in
13 the sense that I was advising a people who I could on a daily basis see were getting
14 screwed by the NVA. I mean, it was a matter of these are the good guys, these are the
15 ones that I'm here to teach, show how to protect themselves against the bad guys- the
16 NVA and VC. And I was willing to accept that, and I never changed my mind about that
17 as I was there.

18 RV: How identifiable were the VC? How easy—because you hear you couldn't
19 tell your enemy from your friend, how could you?

20 RM: They were very easy to identify when they were dead. That's kind of
21 flippant, but that's about the best I can come up with.

22 RV: I've heard that before.

23 RM: Because there was no other way to identify them when they were alive.

24 RV: It was either you saw them in the attack; you could say, 'Okay, those are the
25 Viet Cong,' or they're dead.

26 RM: And it doesn't make any difference if they're Viet Cong or not, they're
27 shooting at me, so therefore, I assume they're the bad guys, and that's what I'm here to
28 do; that's a defensive situation. But even when you would go into the village, we had
29 some situations, and this is where it gets a little crazy. We had some situations. We had
30 Chieu Hois for the purpose here that the Chieu Hoi was essentially like a Kit Carson
31 Scout; it was someone who had been a VC at one time, and he had come over to our side.

1 And we used him for intelligence; we used him as a guide in many areas. And so, I
2 always wondered about them, and I had a lot of them that were really good friends,
3 became guys that I trusted, but I never knew for sure. And we had a couple of situations
4 where we got called in, in the morning we got a call through the channels of
5 communications that we had set up into the district; district chief would come in and say
6 that such and such a village was hit last night, and we need to go out there. So we'd get
7 in our jeeps, and we'd drive out there, and there'd be three VC bodies there, and one of
8 them would be somebody I knew. And it's like, 'Whoa.'

9 RV: Knew from—

10 RM: Yeah, I knew him personally. He was somebody that we had trusted;
11 somebody that we had thought was giving us good information, and at night, he had been
12 part of an attack on that village. The PSDF have held their own and taken these guys out,
13 and there they were.

14 RV: And what do you do inside?

15 RM: Well, yeah, I think the first time it happened, I can remember three different
16 occasions that it happened, and I think the first time it was a really a shock, and by the
17 third time, it wasn't. It was just part of it. So then you start wondering who you can
18 trust. On the other hand, all you've got is their intelligence, so you have to run with it. It
19 wasn't a situation where my life was in danger, but that village was. And of course, the
20 village chief, as they're pointing down and going through this whole thing with the body,
21 would make all these claims about, 'I knew it all along; I knew this guy we shouldn't
22 have trusted him. He would have brought our whole village down.' And of course, part
23 of it was their being proud of what they had just done.

24 RV: Sure. Not losing face.

25 RM: Oh, yeah, and I can remember going out on a couple of night ambush
26 patrols, and we would go out not too far from—it was the scariest, I think the hardest
27 thing that you do as an infantry soldier is a night ambush.

28 RV: I do want you to talk about that in detail. Not necessarily your fear in detail;
29 you can if you want to, and I will ask you about that, but I do want you to describe
30 exactly the operations you guys would do at night, how you would set a night ambush.

1 RM: Part of it, I think, was directed to us by our—the major in charge, our district
2 advisor. We were probably responsible to do one a month or one a week, or somebody
3 that worked for him, he could report it and stuff. That's my guess; that's my cynicism
4 showing here because at times, we'd say, 'Why are we doing this?' But we picked the
5 location, and we'd say, 'Okay, let's go out. We think that the last attack that came in on
6 this particular village came in from the west.'

7 RV: How many days after, you know, a couple days ago?

8 RM: Yeah, two days ago. It would be reasonably—generally speaking, what we
9 would do is if there was an attack on a village, we would go out the next morning, we
10 would call up, and we had real good support from what we call the headhunters. And the
11 headhunters were American Army pilots who flew Cessna 172s out of Pleiku, out of
12 Camp Holloway, which was the area that supported the 4th Division, but it was still there
13 after the 4th had left. And these guys would fly down in their Cessna 172 and land at our
14 little landing strip behind there, and I'd go out and get in. Myself or the other MAT team
15 guy would get in, and we'd fly that area and see if we could see anything, see if we could
16 see any areas of ingress into the village that looked suspicious to us.

17 RV: Meaning what?

18 RM: Oh, smoke, small—we'd get down low enough to where we could see
19 campgrounds, if it looked like there had been any bivouac the night before, little small
20 fires, clearings, anything—you're looking for big things, but you're not finding—I don't
21 know that we ever found anything big, but we're looking for something. So we might
22 say, 'Okay, then what we need to do is to, if this happened now, it might happen again.
23 Let's set up a night ambush on these particular areas of ingress.' So we would go out, so
24 I'd land, and then I'd get a PSDF unit together from the local village.

25 RV: How would you do that?

26 RM: I would go into the village, and I would talk to the village chief. And I'd
27 say, 'Your local PSDF'—because we trained all these guys.

28 RV: So they knew you?

29 RM: Oh, yeah, oh, yeah. They knew us well. And I'd say, 'Okay, let's go out
30 tonight, five o' clock, 1700 hours, let's go out.' We'd usually go out early, that might be
31 a little early, maybe 1900 hours because we'd want to get out—we'd want to go out in

1 daylight and then set up. So, we would go out, and of course you would—well, first of
2 all, I would sit down between the time that I went out on my night, I mean on my
3 reconnaissance, I would sit down, and I would plot on a map exactly where we were
4 going to set up the ambush.

5 RV: How—okay, go ahead, and then you'd go to the village?

6 RM: Yeah, I'd have all this preplanned, and then I'd go to the village. But I
7 would sit out. I would plan it on a map; I would plan the march out, and then I would
8 preset artillery fire at certain locations. And I would walk that over, if I was using these
9 guys, they were almost organic for us even though they weren't designed at the ones that
10 I showed you on the map, they weren't really designed to be our organic artillery, but we
11 could use them. So I would plot out artillery fire. We didn't have any mortar units, so
12 there wasn't anything like that. We had M79s, but we didn't have—so I would plan that.
13 I would also plan flares, and I would tell these guys that I'm going to—at certain sounds
14 because we'd go into communication silence a lot of nights, two clicks would be a mean
15 flare, so we could get a flare up if we saw anything. And so we would have all that
16 planned, and that would be on our trip out, and then I'd also have it planned if we had an
17 attack, if we had an ambush, we would have to have an area of retreat. And as we were
18 retreating back, I would have preplanned fire like everything 300 meters through these
19 particular blocks. All set up, so you don't have to do any thinking, you know exactly
20 where you are, you've set your ambush location for the exact place, so if you get hit at
21 night, if you have an ambush on your retreat, you could just be lighting them up with
22 artillery. And so, that was all done ahead of time. So then you'd get your guys; you'd go
23 out about 1900 hours.

24 RV: How much time—I'm sorry to interrupt you—how much time from after you
25 planned it, and you handed off your coordinates and stuff to the artillery, then you'd go to
26 the village?

27 RM: I'd do to the village. We may have sent somebody; one of my guys may
28 have gone out that afternoon and told them what we were going to do, get everybody to
29 get together at 1900 hours. What you may be thinking is, how long did it take in terms of
30 getting the word to the VC, and I always wondered about that myself (laughs).

1 RV: Yes, yes. Well there's two items: one, how much time, how much lead time
2 did you have to give the ruff-puffs to kind of get ready? You know, to suit up?

3 RM: I think we gave them a lot of time. I don't remember ever being concerned
4 that if we wait and tell them an hour ahead of time, maybe they won't tell the VC. I don't
5 remember that being an issue. I think probably what happened is over time, it just
6 became routine, and it got to the point where you were torn between accepting the fact
7 that the VC are going to know it, and maybe we'll surprise them, and maybe we won't,
8 and if we surprise them, that's a bad thing because that means that we're going to have a
9 real enemy contact. I would like to say that I worried about it, but I don't remember
10 worrying about it. I don't remember, I think it just became part of the job and part of you
11 accepted the fact that—

12 RV: That was reality.

13 RM: Intelligence would get out there.

14 RV: But they wouldn't necessarily know exactly where.

15 RM: They wouldn't know exactly where. And you wanted to kill, you wanted
16 some kills, you wanted some success. I don't ever remember thinking though, 'Oh, boy,
17 I hope we have an enemy contact tonight.' If it happens, it happens. We're ready for it.
18 These guys are good; my PSDFs are pretty good soldiers. I'd always take out—the thing
19 is, usually just two Americans and then the rest would be PSDF. And I'm describing a
20 PSDF ambush thing; I'm not describing some ruff-puff operation, which is different than
21 that. Usually we didn't take the ruff-puffs out at night; we took them out on day
22 operations, but night operations was almost always the boys in the loincloths.

23 RV: (laughs) I assume that's because they were better; they knew the area.

24 RM: Oh, I had a complete confidence in them. They knew the area, and I figured
25 that they knew we were protecting their village, particularly if there'd been a contact two
26 nights before, and they'd lost a couple of people. They want to get these guys, right? So
27 we'd go out, and so we would take because of two Americans, I'd always take—their
28 weapons, as I described last week, were the .45-caliber Thompson submachine gun and
29 the Browning Automatic Rifle. Well, I wanted a little more firepower than that, so we
30 took some M79s, and we took an M60. I always took an M60 out. Took some
31 claymores, and they were not given claymores as part of their normal operation, so we

1 always took claymore mines out. And we took trip wires, and we would—so we would
2 set up either a horseshoe, sometimes we'd do a horseshoe, but most of the time we would
3 do a—excuse me, not a horseshoe, we would set up an L-shape, here and here. Almost
4 always L-shaped, but sometimes, depending on if you could get a situation where—I've
5 forgotten all my military terms now, but if you get a situation where you had a point of
6 ending almost like a cul-de-sac kind of a thing, that you could ward off that way, then
7 you could just line up on this side. And so that's what we would do; most of the time
8 we'd be like across here and hoping that the point would come down, they'd come
9 through here, and then we'd get them this way. So we're describing a very simple
10 operation.

11 RV: You're lined up on a trail?

12 RM: Just off a trail. Viet Cong were just like us, trying to stay off the trails, but
13 you can't really avoid it in the really thick jungles around the Central Highlands. It was
14 pretty thick. So you almost had to use trails. We'd set up some very crude booby traps;
15 we didn't dig pits and do all that kind of stuff, but we had the claymores set up, and the
16 claymores would be command detonated.

17 RV: Who had command of those?

18 RM: Usually I would have those be with one of—usually I'd have an NCO with
19 me, and I'd have him have a couple of them wired together with one squeeze mechanism,
20 and then usually whoever the senior PSDF guy was. We would have him lined up with
21 it. And we would—and then you'd wait. And supposedly you would do—we would go
22 out to the village, and then just as darkness is starting to set in, we'd start our movement.
23 We wouldn't really wait to go out in complete cover of darkness. My fear was always
24 booby traps that had already been set up, and you couldn't see them as well in darkness.
25 So we would go out at when you could see what was going on.

26 RV: When you all would set out on foot, where were you in this—was it a
27 column?

28 RM: Right in the middle, with my RTO.

29 RV: And you're carrying what? Describe to me what you have on your person.

30 RM: I'm carrying a—I'm wearing a 38 Smith & Wesson, that was not assigned to
31 me; we had 45s. I bought that one from one of the guys that had left the year before, in a

1 nice handmade holster that I had made in the village, with tea candles that I had made
2 myself—or I had made, and then I'd carved them and put them on myself, and well
3 blued, that was my personal weapon. Then I carried an AR15, which I had also gotten
4 from an Air Force guy, from an Air Force pilot because we weren't authorized to have
5 those. AR15, we called them CAR-15s, but I don't remember exactly, but it was a very
6 short stock M16 with a folding stock essentially, and it could be put down to a very small
7 size. So I was carrying that with a—we didn't have banana clips, but we would tape two
8 18-round—they're 20-round magazines, and we would put 18 rounds in them, and then
9 we would tape them together, so that I had 36 rounds, could invert it up. So I was
10 carrying that as my other, as my, essentially my weapon. And no ruck because I'm only
11 going to be out there at night, so I'm wearing a magazine shirt that I had had made in the
12 village, where I could slip all these magazines in it. I carried a—I don't think I even
13 carried an ammo pouch. I may have carried an ammo pouch. I carried morphine tubes. I
14 didn't usually take my medic out on something like that; he wasn't a real good fighter, so
15 I figured that he wouldn't come in handy. So I carried my own morphine, and then I had
16 my RTO with me, and he usually carried an M79, so we had that additional firepower if
17 we needed it.

18 RV: Was that his personal choice, or did you say, 'I want you to take this M70.'?

19 RM: Yeah, exactly. Someone's got to carry it, you carry it. And then we'd give
20 an M60 usually to one of the Montagnards, and they loved that. We set that up on a
21 tripod, of course, across the thing. And then the Montagnards pretty much carried their
22 own weapons, I mean, I don't mean crossbows.

23 RV: Right, right.

24 RM: But they carried what we had trained them on. A lot of the Thompson
25 submachine guns with 4-1 tracers. We'd have a couple of BARs. I wasn't real keen on
26 the Stevens shotgun, Single Shot shotgun. Again, not a lot of firepower with that, they
27 hunted birds mostly with those. And then a few M1 Carbines from World War II. In
28 fact, I had one of those myself that I used as a lap gun, and I'd cut the stock off, and I just
29 had a little handle on it like that. And I used that; I called that my lap gun because when
30 we'd run the highways, I would carry that on my lap. It was a nice, small thing to have
31 right here.

1 RV: You're really well armed.

2 RM: Pretty well armed, but again, the guys that you're fighting against are going
3 to all be carrying AK47s, and I don't know if we were sufficiently armed to take them on
4 in an ambush situation.

5 RV: But you were the ones springing the ambush.

6 RM: We were springing the ambush, and we had the artillery. Quite frankly, it
7 would be the artillery that would make the difference because if we sprung an ambush,
8 we'd be out of there quick, and our area of egress was pre-plotted. And if they were
9 chasing us, which hopefully they wouldn't be because we had been successful, we would
10 be bringing the world on top of them with that artillery. And our area of egress would be
11 well protected. My guess is there would never have been a situation where they chased
12 us on our way out.

13 RV: Did they?

14 RM: We only—in what I have just described to you, we only sprung one ambush.
15 The victim was a leopard. And I had remembered this, and I took pictures of it and
16 everything. But it came back in time because it was in a letter to my wife; I wrote back
17 to her telling her about this leopard ambush.

18 RV: So of all the times you went out on ambush, you only sprung it once on this?

19 RM: Yeah, and we got a leopard.

20 RV: How many times do you think you went out on ambush?

21 RM: I'm going to guess I didn't go out more than once a month on a night
22 ambush, so maybe 10 times in my whole tour? Yes. The only ambush I was ever
23 involved in with an enemy was I was on the receiving end.

24 RV: Night time?

25 RM: Daytime.

26 RV: Daytime. Was it a problem of the VC knowing where you guys were going to
27 be setting up, the whole deal?

28 RM: I believe so because when I think of all the night ambushes that, you know,
29 say if I did it 10 times, but we probably did 40 of them as a responsibility of our district
30 group. I don't remember that we ever were successful, that we ever killed anybody on a
31 night ambush. We were the victims on the highway a lot; I was in a lot of—I was

1 ambushed on the highway several times. Ambushed once on a day operation. So my
2 guess is that the intelligence network of the VC was pretty sufficient, and if they knew
3 they were outnumbered at night, they didn't mess with us.

4 RV: How did they know if they were outnumbered?

5 RM: I'm guessing that they knew everything. I'm guessing that they knew all
6 about how many men we typically took out.

7 RV: Which was?

8 RM: Two Americans and 22, maybe 22, maybe half a platoon, maybe whether
9 that be two and a half squads, something like that. PSDF wasn't quite as organized as an
10 American unit, so I think I remember going out with 20 to 25 men. I mean, that's a good
11 size unit, but you know, you wouldn't be able to stand up to AK47s sufficiently, if they
12 had the same number. I think they also knew about the artillery, and they knew that we
13 could bring the world in. And we never had a night contact other than this one leopard
14 thing.

15 RV: Did you think about it at the time?

16 RM: Oh, yeah, I was scared every night. I was scared shitless—excuse me, I was
17 scared all the time when I went out on a night ambush.

18 RV: Well, did you think about the fact that, wait a minute, we're not making a lot
19 of contact here. This is not making sense.

20 RM: I think I thought more along the lines of we got back in, it was successful
21 because nobody got hurt, and maybe the fact that we did it kept this village safe that
22 night.

23 RV: Okay, couple questions then. The first one, again, might sound simplistic,
24 but what was the point of the ambush, the American night ambush?

25 RM: The ambush, the point was that, well, for one thing, we could report that we
26 did it. That meant we were working, doing our job. Secondly, I think that if the village
27 was hit last night, and we could get out within two days, then we might be successful. I
28 guess it's kind of like fishing: there are men who fish, and there are men who never catch
29 the marlin, but they still go fishing. We, looking at it from the standpoint of what can we
30 do? We can do this. These people are trained; they could do it without us, but there's
31 more likely—and will be more likely successful with us because if they do it without us,

1 they don't have the artillery support that they're going to need. We might get a body
2 count out of it. If we do have, if we do catch that same unit coming back in, or
3 something like that unit, and we're able to take them out, then we'll get a body count, and
4 we may get a big body count because with all this artillery. But you're right, I mean, if I
5 did it 10 times and never was successful, would I have been successful if I'd done it 20
6 times? We usually did not do it without there having been an incident of some kind, so
7 we didn't just say, 'Let's go out and do an ambush.' We did it because something had
8 happened. So, I guess from the positive standpoint, you'd say, 'Yeah, well maybe we
9 kept that village from getting hit that next night, and maybe they knew that we might be
10 out there on ambush, so therefore they let that village alone.'

11 RV: Why were you all more reactive versus proactive?

12 RM: Well, that's a very good question that gets to the whole issue of the way we
13 conducted the war. As you probably know, most studies have shown that 70 percent of
14 all contacts with the NVA or the VC were initiated by them, not by the Americans. We
15 were defensive, we were reactive. I think probably just because we were outnumbered,
16 we were small; we only had you know, 15 of us. They on their own may have done
17 more, but our involvement was that we participated more on a reactive basis.

18 RV: What defines success on an ambush, besides Ron getting back and the RTO
19 getting back safe and sound?

20 RM: I'm afraid I might say that that's the number one thing. Other than that, I
21 think the success would be in watching the men perform, watching whether they
22 maneuvered properly on patrol, whether they kept radio silence, whether they kept their
23 own silence, whether they conducted themselves as I knew they were capable of doing,
24 whether they seemed to have their heart in it, whether they seemed to be afraid or scared.
25 In a lot of ways, by number eight or nine, there was a lot of nonchalance on their part.
26 Not on my part, but on their part.

27 RV: Why? They just said—

28 RM: I don't know, I think that just doing it again, and maybe it's the old thing
29 that... I'm reminded of when I used to coach t-ball, and I'm reminded of being out in
30 centerfield, and my little centerfield t-baller was standing out there with his glove on his
31 head. And I said to him, 'Johnny, you better take that glove off your head and put it on

1 your hand; they may hit a ball out here.’ And he said, ‘Mr. Milam, I’ve been out here all
2 summer, and nobody has ever hit out here.’

3 RV: (laughs)

4 RM: And I think there is something to that.

5 RV: I’m laughing because he does have a great point. I heard the same thing this
6 past summer.

7 RM: Because the real good players are playing shortstop and first base and
8 pitcher, right? Or on the pitcher’s mound, I guess, in t-ball. They’re not in centerfield,
9 and the kid is in centerfield because he puts his glove on his head.

10 RV: (laughs) Right, right.

11 RM: So anyway, I hate to laugh and make that comparison, but it’s kind of like
12 that. I think in a lot of cases, these soldiers, these PSDF soldiers who were good soldiers,
13 may have seen a little bit of folly in it, in why are we doing this? And like I say, we got
14 that leopard, boy we got him good. And that was like the most excitement that we’d had
15 on a night ambush.

16 RV: What’d you do with the leopard?

17 RM: They skinned it, and I assume they ate it. They dressed it beautifully, put it
18 on a stick and carried it back into the village. I got some great pictures of it, just
19 amazing. And it was a beautiful leopard, I mean, it was a beautiful leopard from an
20 American viewpoint of what I’ve seen in a zoo. Good size. It had been wounded earlier
21 by somebody taking a shot at it. We’d heard some shots early at night, and I think it
22 came back. I think it was already wounded, but they lit it up. They lit it up with M60.
23 Oh, gee, they just really put it to it.

24 RV: Okay, and I’m not laughing to make light of the situation, and I’m certainly
25 not passing judgment on the tactics or strategy here. I’m just curious, from someone who
26 went through it, what you saw, what you felt. Again, simplistic question with probably a
27 very deep answer: why were you scared shitless?

28 RM: You feel totally... at the mercy of an enemy who knows where he is and is
29 comfortable in the jungle compared to me, compared to me personally. I haven’t lived in
30 a jungle; I’m a city boy. I’m not a gun person. I got pretty good at what I did, and in an
31 ambush, supposedly you know where you are, and he doesn’t know where he is, therefore

1 you have the advantage. But it's dark; it's night. I also, in the great Army's wisdom, put
2 an officer, an infantry officer and me who had poor vision. I almost didn't get in the
3 Army at all because my night vision was so bad, so I wasn't someone who saw real good
4 at night anyway.

5 RV: You knew this going in?

6 RM: Oh, yeah, oh, yeah, I knew it. And so I had to do things like preplan my
7 flares. Oh, flare was the best thing in the world for me because I could put on of those on
8 top and look out and see everything. But that night stuff, seeing in the pure dark. Now
9 some people used to kid me about that, saying, 'Well, you're not scared at night because
10 you can't see anything.' I'm not like some people, everything I saw I thought was the
11 enemy. No, I couldn't see much. To this day I don't have great night vision. So that was
12 I think an issue also, is I never felt real comfortable there. I had great... I had strong
13 feelings for the quality of my men, the Montagnards, but I didn't know how they would
14 react in a real situation. You can practice all you want, you know on a range or anything,
15 but you know, when the trip flare goes off and the first claymore is fired, and that leopard
16 was a perfect example. If it was, you know, one leopard, we got him good, but he
17 couldn't fight back. I don't know how we would have done if it had been more than one
18 man. What if it was—I had 25 men, what if it was a company? What if it was the scout
19 team of a company? That's what I always feared is I might get, you know, we might be
20 successful getting the first seven or eight, but if there's 150 behind them, and we're
21 fleeing, we've got our egress plan, and then I'm going to drop the world in on top of them
22 with all this artillery. But what if there really is 150 of them, and we don't get out? So,
23 ambush is tough; ambush is really tough. And the other thing is, in American units, most
24 of the time, lieutenants, officers don't go out on ambush. That's what squads do, that's
25 what NCOs do, that's what sergeants do. The lieutenant stays back. I was a lieutenant. I
26 wasn't acting like a lieutenant on an ambush patrol; I was just another soldier out there.
27 So, yeah, I didn't like night ambushes. That was to me the worst. The things that I was
28 most scared of in Vietnam were landmines on the highway. I was never afraid of the
29 first—if I could not be hit by the first mortars that fell, I always felt like I could get to
30 safety before they would adjust, so mortars were not that scary to me. Rockets were
31 never scary because rockets were so inaccurate. They just didn't know where they were

1 going sort of thing. But the things that scared me the most were landmines and night
2 ambushes; I just didn't like those.

3 RV: How dark would it get?

4 RM: Well, you know, depending on the moon. There were no lights in the area,
5 so you know, if the moon was full, it wasn't very dark. If the moon was not full, pretty
6 dark in the jungle.

7 RV: Did you want it to be? It's a loaded question, did you want it to be dark or
8 did you want a full moon?

9 RM: With my poor night vision, I think I wanted all the light I could get, even
10 understanding that your success is probably going to be less on a night like that because
11 they could, you know, they're not going to be out necessarily. I like to see, I like to see.
12 Never conducted a day ambush. Was ambushed during the day, as I told you, but
13 never—so we didn't even think about doing them during the day. It was at night because
14 that's when the VC were out. That's when you know, you're not going to get them in the
15 daytime. You get them at night, so you know, look in a book and say, 'Let's put in night
16 ambushes.' And I always felt good. When I got in, we all survived, I would you know
17 right my After-Action report up. The leopard one was great, I'm sure. I'll have to go to
18 the archives and read that one; I'm sure it's out there. Yeah, I didn't like night ambushes.

19 RV: What do you see right now when you think about that night ambush? What
20 do you see in your mind's eye?

21 RM: I remember the leopard one particularly, but I also remember my last one
22 because my last one took place about three weeks before I came home in a time that I felt
23 like I shouldn't be going out on night ambush. It also took place after the siege of Phu
24 Nhon, and the NVA were in the area, and we knew that. So it was really—I was really
25 scared that night, and I remember thinking that this might be it. And we took out extra
26 men and all those kinds of things. But you know, since I'd never been in one, didn't
27 know how we would do, that one scared me a lot more because I knew in three weeks, I
28 wouldn't have to ever do another night ambush.

29 RV: Right, right. Describe to me before we stop for today, after you go out, you
30 describe the lead up during the day of kind of planning the thing, and then you head out

1 right there at dusk when night is falling, but you can still see. How far out would you go?
2 You would go in column, who was on point, things like that.

3 RM: Yeah, there seems like there was always some PSDF soldier who would
4 volunteer to walk point. I never ever remembering saying, having to force someone.
5 You always—my attitude, and I wasn't in American units, so I don't know how the
6 American's did it, but I've read enough about it. I always believed that you want your
7 best man on point, and I think American units did that. That's why I don't ever buy into,
8 you know, the issue of black men walk point more than white guys because white guys
9 didn't mind black guys dying. Well, you want your best, you want your best. Native
10 American Indians were the best; they had comfort in the—or guys from Tennessee or
11 guys that had been hunters all their life. They just had a feel for the woods, in this case
12 the jungle. So you'd put your best man out there. So there was always somebody that
13 would want to walk point, so we'd put him out there. Then we'd have the column as it
14 came back, we would try to disperse the weapons so that we had a BAR up front, as
15 much as we could get one up front there. I would always throw, like I say, my RTO
16 carried an M79, so I always had him there next to me. And then I walked in the middle,
17 middle as I could get. And I always wore—I never wore insignia, and I very seldom
18 wore jungle fatigues. I had camouflage fatigues made in the village for me that were real
19 skin tight, so they didn't brush against anything, and no names or anything on it.

20 RV: What kind of hat?

21 RM: I wore a, like a Boonie Cap, it was called, and it was essentially a floppy
22 with a chinstrap underneath it. And I had a camouflage one, and then I had just a plain
23 green one. Never a helmet. I didn't wear a helmet in Vietnam. I'm trying to think; I had
24 one, I was issued one, and I don't believe I ever even put it on when I went out when we
25 got hit at night, when we got mortared I didn't put it on.

26 RV: Why not?

27 RM: I don't know. I just didn't like it. It was heavy on my head, and I never
28 really thought it could save me much, so I just didn't ever wear it. I don't even remember
29 anyone telling me to wear it. Never wore it in a jeep. Never. I know it sounds crazy
30 when I think about it now, but I just didn't like wearing a helmet, and I think I had to go
31 look for it when I left to make sure I'd have it to turn it in in Saigon.

1 RV: How about your RTO, did he wear a helmet or not?

2 RM: I don't think so. When we went on a night ambush, nobody wore helmets.
3 Remember, the 'yards are wearing loincloths and are barefoot in some cases. Some of
4 them may have worn Ho Chi Minhs, but mostly they're barefoot. So you know, me with
5 a helmet on and a flak jacket, that's another thing. Never wore a flak jacket. I wore a
6 flak jacket during the seize of Phu Nhon when I knew everything was hitting the fan. I
7 ran across that yard that—oh, I'll tell you that later on, but I ran across that yard, and
8 when I got in, my flak jacket was totally filled with shrapnel. So it saved me, the one
9 time I wore it. But even after that, I never wore it. I never wore it in the jeep. I should
10 have worn it in the jeep when we made the trips, but I didn't. I don't know, it's a good
11 question, but I don't know why I didn't. I never wore—on an operation like that, I had
12 long pants on. I wore these things that I had made, and I wore jungle boots. I had carried
13 a flashlight with a red cover, but I traveled light on those night operations. In fact, I
14 hardly ever wore a rucksack. I can only remember a couple of operations where I had to
15 wear a rucksack because I thought I would be out long enough, and it was mostly filled
16 with ammunition. I was fortunate in the kind of operations that we went out on that were
17 very short in duration. I was not one of these soldiers that spent 14 days in the boonies
18 before he got to come back in. So, I have great respect for the infantry soldiers of the
19 American units who would go out on those kinds of operations. I traveled light.

20 RV: Did you have a knife or a canteen?

21 RM: Carried a canteen, but I didn't carry a knife I don't believe. I don't
22 remember having a knife. I had a—no, I don't think I carried a knife.

23 RV: How do you walk into the jungle and kind of disappear, I guess, into the
24 jungle, into the bush, they're seeking to make contact, someone who wants to kill you,
25 walking out there not knowing what's going to happen... how do you do that?

26 RM: Well, you try to draw on all that training that you've had about stealth, about
27 quiet. I think what happens to someone like myself, a leader, someone that didn't grow
28 up this way, I'm not a person that was a hunter, so it didn't come naturally for me. But I
29 think what happens is that you are the leader, and because you're the leader, you're in
30 charge, it would be no different than if I was the—walked into a boardroom, and I had to
31 conduct a meeting, and we had to decide what product we need to get out and how we're

1 going to turn a profit with it. Which at this time in my life, hadn't done that either
2 (laughs). Not later for years I would do that, and as I think back, that's kind of what I
3 compare it do. But at that moment in time, this was my first leadership role, and so,
4 being afraid, yeah, I was. Being scared of night vision, yeah, it was all those things, but I
5 was in charge, and it was on me that the lives of all those men depended. I had to have
6 my stuff together; I had to have my artillery preplanned. I had to be the one that if there
7 was a contact, I had to be the guy that was able to save their lives and create body count
8 in addition to that. So, I don't remember thinking, even though I was scared, I remember
9 having enough presence of mind to say, 'This is your show. You're the one who said,
10 'Boys, we're going out tonight.' You're the one who said, 'We might get something.'
11 You're the one that flew the reconnaissance in the morning and saw some opportunities
12 where maybe this could have taken place last night, and maybe they'll be back tonight.
13 You're the one that put the plan together; you better have your shit together.' So that was
14 the most important thing to me. On all those operations, all those night operations, even
15 though when they said, 'Hey, we need somebody to take a night ambush patrol out
16 tonight, who wants to go?' I don't ever remember my hand going up first.

17 RV: I mean that's almost like a self-preservation thing, you know. I'll do it if
18 asked, and I have to.

19 RM: And I'll do it well, I mean I felt confident that I could perform with all the
20 training that I had had. But I also can remember thinking, 'Gee whiz, maybe something
21 will happen, and they'll change their mind.'

22 RV: I doubt you said, 'Gee whiz.'

23 RM: No, I didn't. Thinking, 'Maybe he'll change his mind.' It was almost
24 always at the direction of the district advisor.

25 RV: The American?

26 RM: The American district advisor, yeah. Well, by definition, American advisor,
27 district advisor. And he was pretty—the second one, we had two of them, and the second
28 one was really good in this sense. He would come in, and he'd say, 'I think we need to
29 do a night ambush because of what happened there. Who wants to do it?' He would say
30 that a lot, and he didn't get a lot of volunteers, but it was a matter of you know, my turn,

1 my time. So I don't ever remember saying, being the one that initiated the idea of a night
2 ambush.

3 RV: Would you guys draw straws? Did you just rotate?

4 RM: No, I think you just look at each other and say, 'Who did it last?' I was the
5 assistant advisor—I was the assistant MAT leader. My captain, he had rank on me. He
6 was a first lieutenant when he got there, and then he made captain, and that's why they
7 gave him the job. He was a 16-year service—had 16 years, and 12 of it I think, or 13 of it
8 as an enlisted man. But he had no combat experience. When he came in, I had already
9 earned my CIB, I'd already been in several contacts, I'd been ambushed on the highway,
10 I'd already been out on... been ambushed in the fields, so I had a lot of combat
11 experience. He had none. And actually, by the end of the tour, by the end of my tour, he
12 still had less combat experience than I had had, only because his all came at the end of
13 my tour, which was sort of the middle of his tour. And I think—and it's funny how you
14 think about situations like that. You've been in combat—I was going on these night
15 patrols, on night ambush patrols, but I'd had, I don't know, my short-timers chart, I used
16 to mark every time I was in an enemy contact. I had little codes for big contacts, small
17 contacts, stuff like this, and I'd put a little square around it. And I think the other day we
18 were going through, and I had 25 or something, of varying degrees. And I think you
19 almost feel like you're getting good at it. You're not overconfident exactly, but you think
20 you're better at it than he is, so he was my boss, and I can remember sort of feeling like,
21 well, he's in charge, but he's not as good at what I'm doing with this moment as I am. So
22 I may have volunteered in that sense; I may have said, 'No, I'll take it, Pete. I'll do it,
23 I've done this before.' I may have done that, but it was never done in a sense of, I don't
24 ever remember thinking that I should do it because this will help win the war, or I should
25 do it because, after all, that's what they're paying me to do. I was always reluctant, but it
26 might have been that by if I had been too reluctant, then somebody else would have had
27 to done it and maybe wouldn't be as good at it as I am because I'd been through it before.

28 RV: Did you ever say, 'Hey, why don't you come out with me, and I'll kind of
29 show you?'

30 RM: No, because the lieutenant and a captain—

31 RV: You don't do that.

1 RM: Both out, you'd never do that. In fact, we didn't even ride in the same jeeps;
2 we each had our own jeeps, and we very seldom—I don't ever remember being out on
3 any operation with him. The only time we were ever in combat together was the night
4 that the compound was overrun in March 16th—15th and 16th of '71. And we were all in
5 it that night, and that was, I think, probably when he got most of his combat experience, it
6 was that night. For a lot of us, it was the worst we were ever in, but it wasn't the first.
7 So I think—but you have real mixed emotions. I never went out on operation hoping for
8 contact, even though that's what you're there for. I don't ever remember thinking, 'Oh,
9 boy, I hope tonight's the night we get to kill somebody.' I don't ever remember thinking
10 that, but I remember thinking that that's what we're trained to do; if they say do it, we'll
11 go do it. Kind of like the whole thing of being there in the first place. They told me to
12 go, I'm trained to do it, I'll go do it. But I don't ever remember being the first to
13 volunteer for anything.

14 RV: Do you write an extra letter that day, or a letter that day before you go out,
15 and say—

16 RM: You mean to my wife? We had this deal where we would write—all of us,
17 most of the guys, we'd write several letters and date them, like I'd sit down on Sunday
18 afternoon—because we literally would take, try to take Saturday afternoons and all day
19 Sunday off. We were in a compound; it was kind of stand down time. And we always
20 wore civilian clothes that day, and even if we pulled guard duty, we pulled it in cutoffs,
21 or if we went out in the highway, even if a village down south got hit, I threw on my
22 magazine vest and grabbed my CAR-15, and I went in my shorts because it was Sunday.
23 It was just part of maintaining some kind of normalcy that's weekend. So on Sunday
24 afternoons, a lot of times—I had this thing with my wife where I would try to write her so
25 she could get a letter everyday. And so on Sunday afternoon, I might sit down and write
26 five letters, and one would be Monday's, one would be Tuesday's, one would be
27 Wednesday's, just saying the same thing all the time. It'd be, 'I love you very much.'
28 You're very seldom saying what happens, so what difference does it make what you call
29 it? It's just something to open on the other end. Although, as I've read these letters in
30 recent, I'm still amazed that I said as many things as I did to her about the war. I don't
31 remember doing, but I apparently did. But what I would do is we would always tell the

1 guys that, 'If I'm not here tomorrow, if I'm killed, mail the letter anyway when the
2 chopper comes in,' because the choppers would come in to resupply us; virtually
3 everyday we would get mail, we would get food, we would get movies from Saigon, 16-
4 mm movies. So you'd tell them to put a letter on there, put Tuesday's on there. And you
5 just leave it on your desk, had a little desk in our hooch there. So I did that, and so I had
6 all these letters kind of stacked up and the instructions to the guys. Well, when we had
7 our big siege in '71, choppers couldn't get in, and we were being resupplied with
8 ammunition only, and they weren't taking mail and all that kind of stuff. So she didn't
9 get a letter for a week, and even though the letters were written—so now, when I read the
10 letters, she's got all these letters and everyday during the siege, I mean, she didn't get
11 them, you know? And so it's like, whoa, so I had to explain all of that. So, no, I don't
12 think preeminence, if you're trying to get to preeminent, where you're thinking that you
13 might die and stuff like that, I don't—I think after awhile, you just think that it might
14 come anytime. It could come from a mortar, it could come from a landmine on the
15 highway, like I say, those landmines were my bigger fear. I worried more about going
16 into Pleiku, to the PX to get beer, going in for meetings. We usually, if it was a meeting,
17 they'd fly us in, but we did some really stupid and crazy things about, you know, we
18 would make runs to the PX, or we'd make runs to the Air Force base there in Pleiku
19 because they had all the good food. And we would trade them, we'd get these
20 Montagnard crossbows the guys would make for us, and we'd take them in and trade
21 them for a case of steaks. We could pretty much get all the beer and booze we wanted,
22 but steaks were hard to get, and so we would trade things for them. And we'd make the
23 runs, and I was an officer, but I'd make the run. I very seldom drove because I had my
24 own jeep, and I was a pretty good driver, but I didn't even learn to drive a stick shift until
25 I got to Vietnam. So I wasn't the kind of person who feels real comfortable driving a
26 jeep in combat, so I usually pulled rank and would ride shotgun. And truly, in combat,
27 you ride shotgun, you're riding shotgun. You have a gun on your lap, and then my—then
28 I'd usually have someone drive, and I say that—I was ambushed so many times. I don't
29 even know how many times. It just happened, seems like every time we went to Pleiku
30 we got ambushed.

31 RV: On the road you got ambushed?

1 RM: On the road, oh, yeah, we got shot at. We had a B40 rocket hit, in fact... no,
2 I wasn't driving then either, I was trying to think if I was ever driving when we got
3 ambushed, I don't think that we ever were. The one time, we got ambushed one time
4 when a B40 rocket, or you know, an RPG fired from a B40, hit the windshield on my
5 side. Like, I'm here, and it hit the windshield and didn't explode. It just fell off to the
6 side of the road.

7 RV: Oh, my gosh.

8 RM: Yeah, I mean, stuff like that. It was such a common occurrence that we
9 would get ambushed, that we didn't even ever think we weren't going to be ambushed.
10 We would just go.

11 RV: And of course, you wouldn't wear your helmet. You just would take off.
12 You'd have your M1 or your M14.

13 RM: I had an M1 Carbine sometimes, and I remember, I think the M1 Carbine, I
14 think I carried that in the beginning of my tour because it was neat, it was cool. The
15 guys—and I bought it from somebody for 10 bucks or something. And then I think after
16 one of the ambushes, I decided that wasn't real smart because you had to throw that
17 switch, and it was, you know, it was a World War II weapon, so it didn't have nearly the
18 firepower. You couldn't get enough out there, and that's all you care about in an
19 ambush. All you care about in an ambush in a vehicle is firing your weapon enough to
20 get their heads down, so that they're not accurate coming back at you; that's all you care.
21 You don't care if you're hitting anything; you just want to start putting it out there. And
22 you can't do that with an M1 very well, so I think I started carrying that CAR-15 after the
23 first couple of times of ambush. The guys kind of said, 'Hey, this, you know, you
24 better'—we also had, on one of our jeeps we had an M60 mounted on a tripod as the back
25 thing, and then on one of them, we had a .50-cal.

26 RV: That helps.

27 RM: Yeah, it does. And then we had, of course, sandbags on top of all that.
28 Sandbags in the bottom of the jeep to keep mines, and you can hit a jeep—you can hit an
29 anti-personnel mine with a jeep, and if you have sandbags, you will be protected, your
30 feet will be protected. If you hit an anti-tank mine, you won't be. And we knew that, so
31 we were always scared. But we would try to get the engineers out first; we had an

1 engineering battalion down the highway that the intersection in My Thach where an M14
2 went off here. And their job was to patrol M14 every morning—I mean, Highway 14
3 every morning for landmines, and they had a minesweeping operation. And then we'd
4 always go behind that, and it seems like every time we didn't do that, if somebody went
5 out early, then we'd have problems, and we had Lambrettas blown up by landmines, and
6 you know, 20 people dead kind of thing. It was really sad. That was the worst fear for
7 me, was the landmine. Just terrible, the destruction. I saw a deuce and a half, an
8 American deuce and a half, a [2 ½ pound truck], and in fact, I think it was the first
9 American I ever saw killed. I saw an anti-tank mine come up through the bottom of a
10 deuce and a half and kill the driver, just cut him in half. The anti-tank mines were just
11 terrible; that was my worst fear.

12 RV: We need to stop, time wise. Thanks, Ron, we'll pick up again.

13 RM: Okay.