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Van Regenmorter, Roger

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Narrator's name: Mr. Roger Van Regenmorter
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Place of interview: Narrator's home, Orange City, Iowa
Interviewer's name: Emily Todd
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ET: This is Emily Todd and I'm conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Roger Van Regenmorter. Today is March 31st, 2007. It's approximately 2:53. We're in Orange City, IA, at Mr. Van Regenmorter's home, here in his kitchen area. So why don't we just go ahead and start with a short biographical sketch of yourself before your involvement in the Vietnam War.

RV: Ok. I guess I didn't know much about the Vietnam War. I came out of high school in 1964. Basically, there was the draft then. Wondered when the draft would be up to me. Checked it out and they said it was going to be awhile, so didn't think anymore of that. And then they expanded it quicker, so all of a sudden I had the "Dear John"[1] letter come in the mail that they wanted me. And then I still didn't hear much on the news or pay much attention to Vietnam.

Went to basic training, and that was… I left for the service in '65 of November. Went for two months basic training. Still never really heard much about Vietnam when we were there other than they were training us to get us physically in shape. Came home for a time at home—a furlough they call that—and then I got my orders to go to Fort Lee, Virginia.

And my orders there were to be a cook—that's what came up to be and that was… later on I found out that it was more of a cook for a an infantry division. But still never really put two and two together that I might end up Vietnam. Until we got my orders. I read my orders; a lot of the guys that were with me then had Germany[2] written on me and were excited about that. And I got mine and it said to report for a tour of duty in Vietnam. And that's when I remember I looked what I could find about Vietnam, talked to a few people and they said, "Oh, there's a scrimmage going down there; there's an unrest; there's Communist movement. That's what that's all about."

And what I do remember is when I called home, and I called home to my folks and told them that I got my orders and it was to Vietnam. My mom was just dead silent—just didn't comment, just didn't say anything. And later on I think maybe

[1] Typically, a Dear John letter is a one written to a husband or boyfriend by his wife or girlfriend, telling him that their relationship is over. In this case, Van Regenmorter seems to mean it's the letter from the government indicating he had been drafted ("Dear John").
[2] After World War II and continuing well past 1964, the United States maintained a strong military presence in West Germany in response to the Soviet Union's presence in East Germany (Carter).

they had been paying more attention to that than what I did and were more aware of what was going on.

So then I came home again for a couple weeks, I believe—before I had to leave for Vietnam. So that's what brought that up to that point.

ET: Okay. Let me see… Did you ever consider college or were you just right out of high school when you got—

RV: No, I wasn't considering college. I was going to farm; my dad farmed—I was going to work for a farmer for a while and then get my own farm, and that was my intentions on doing that. And I did think that maybe I would look into the National Guard so that I wouldn't have to be drafted and that I would be able to do it on a weekend basis. So that's kind of what I planned—but that was altered when they moved the draft up on me.

ET: You were living around the Orange City area?

RV: I stayed living around the Orange City area, between Orange City and Maurice. Yeah, that's where I was when I—

ET: I see. What was basic training like for you? Was it… hard?

RV: Basic training wasn't—the physical part wasn't as hard for me as some people. I was a farm boy that was used to work and getting up in the morning early, and so where some kids—that really took its toll.

But it was like a lot of running that I didn't do that they wanted to get you in shape for--. It was the harassment that you took to make you physically or mentally used to that. Like in the middle of the night, they'd just get you out, file you outside, do some calisthenics, do some running. They'd let you go back to bed and a couple hours later they'd get you up again—things like that that to me was senseless but-- There was a reason for that, but that was what I had a hard time overcoming. You know, *why* they do that.

ET: They were trying to harden you up.

RV: Harden, yes. That's what it was. To make you hard and just to really put out all you could.

ET: What about the drill sergeants? Were you particularly afraid of them? I've heard stories about them being particularly tough.

RV: Yes, they were nasty. They were ugly people, that just made your life miserable and they would--. Yes, you were scared to death of them. Really now I look back and see they really couldn't do anything to you that bad, but they did make your life

miserable and they—yes, they were not very well liked people.

It was do what they wanted, and then just kind of stay low key so you don't get summonsed out. And don't volunteer for anything.

ET: Along with the physical training, did you have to take classes in certain things?

RV: Not in basic we didn't have to take a lot of classes. The only thing we started to do the end of basic training is, they started to introduce you to shooting weapons and that kind of a course you took. And all different—like hand grenades and what they could do and how much time you had use them; and all that when and where and a few things like that that they started to give to you.

ET: Did you have any friends or family that were either enlisted or drafted around the same time as you or before?

RV: I had like a second cousin that I didn't know very well, but he spent the time in basic as I did. So being that I knew that he was there, I spent time with him across the base. But other than that, you just made your friends when you got there. And then now that I look back on it, those I can't hardly remember because I made those for two months and then we all got separated, they didn't keep anybody together. So, then you just kind of forgot about those, but then the relation that I knew that was down there the same time I did, I kind of stayed in touch with him.

ET: And everyone kind of scattered when they got their orders too.

RV: Yes, two months together and then that was it.

ET: When did you arrive in Vietnam? How was the trip over there? Do you remember much of that?

RV: Yes, I remember quite a bit of that. The long plane ride for one thing. I remember that it was really, really hard to leave my girlfriend—which is my wife now—and my folks. And then I remember riding over there, because I did some more studying about Vietnam then and got some more that just—I wondered if I'd ever come back. Because yes, that could or could not be.

And then what I remember is, when I got there—the smell. The smell of that country was just horrible. And that's what most people that I talk to that have been over there now, they still comment on the smell of the country.

But I still didn't realize fully what it was going to be like over there. When we got over there, we were told before the plane touched down that we were going to land in Bien Hoa Air Base[3] and that they would bring us to a bunker. And then when we

[3] Situated about 20 miles north of Saigon, Bien Hoa served as a key U.S. air base during the Vietnam War (Bass).

got off the plane, like I said, the smell and so of the country was human air; it was like, "Oh man, I gotta be here for a year." It was almost too much.

But then soon as we got to this bunker or barracks there and we rationed our weapons, we were met the fact that this was gonna be with us and we were not supposed to do anything unless we had it. And then it hit home that I was going to be in a conflict or war—whatever they called it then. They kind of said it was a conflict first. So that's when it hit home that I had a year of duty to do and might not ever get home.

ET: What were your unit's responsibilities?

RV: I was with the 2nd of the 18th, first infantry division. I started out—it was an infantry division where we went out into—

[Phone rings. Van Regenmortar's wife passes through the kitchen and answers it in the background.]

—different areas. And we would secure an area, and then build a base camp off of that. So, like I said, I started out in the cooking department for the infantry. So then, we were to see to it that the men in the infantry would get their meals.

So since they went out into the jungle and were flown into an area, then we would fly into an area with the food in a helicopter. And yes, a lot of times we took a lot of fire from—ground fire—because they didn't want food to come into those guys or anything like that. We were always glad to get back on ground again, because in the air you were kind of a sitting duck.

So that's how I started, and I ended up in the infantry. That I came out of what we call the mess hall or the cooking part, because our company suffered a lot of casualties. And it ended up that they needed me in the infantry and so I was moved out of the kitchen into the infantry.

And like I said, we didn't stay in one location in Vietnam. Our company was designed to make all these what they call semi-secure bases. So we would get dropped into an area where there was totally brush and trees and then we would spread out and secure the area and make sure that the Vietcong or Charlie[4]—which was called Charlie out there in that area—and then once we got that done, we set up a perimeter. And then a lot of times, with these big helicopters, they would carry a caterpillar. They can pick up a cat, and then they would set that cat down in the middle of our area. And he would bulldoze a clear area so that it was an open spot so that they could later on fly a plane into it for supplies and then we would start to make bunkers and a clearing around the outside where we could set ground lines

[4] The Vietcong were forces in South Vietnam allied with the North Vietnamese and were also known as the National Liberation Front or the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam. The military phonetic for VC is Victor Charlie, and Charlie became a nickname for the Vietcong troops (Coffey).

and fences and razor wire so that it would be somewhat secure, so that Charlie wouldn't be able to get in.

We did that during the day, and then at night when it was just about sun down, then you took turns in every direction from that circle, we would go on what we call a patrol—a night patrol. And with like three or four of us in patrol, we would go out through that mine field that we set up, over that razor wire, and then we would set out in the jungle around a tree with three or four of us. And then that's where we would pull our guard during the night, so that each side had like three or four guys way out front. And the reason for that was that if Charlie—or the Vietcong—would try to come into that base, then we would see them and when they got past us, then the people that were pulling guard duty at the base, they could either fire at them from that way or we could fire at them from the back way. But yes, we always had a risk, fire from our guys too when we were in that position.

So that would mean that like some nights, if it was raining all night long, you just sat in the rain all night long and just did your guard duty. So that was, basically, when we get this all set up, we move to another area and start all over and do that again. And we, like I said, we moved all over—close to Cambodia border and did that, the Mekong Delta[5]—we were down in that area, and that was somewhat different because the Mekong Delta, the oceans with the water, with the tide will come in and it will raise. So during the day, you might think you're on dry ground. But then in the night, when the tide comes in, it could be six, seven inches of water. So there's where we tied hammocks in the trees so that we could sleep in a hammock because if you laid on the ground, you'd get wet. But then we, what we were down there is we were stopping Charlie from coming in with supplies in these little rivers and we were pulling guard duty there so that when he come up the river with these little boats we could intercept them. And that's what we did down the Mekong Delta for a while.

And then we moved up in the rubber plantation close to Cambodia border, and every area was different because the climate--- the landscaping—was different. Like in the rubber plantation, those were more like trees that were so far apart and there was more clearing. It wasn't so thick jungle. Because a lot of the places in Vietnam, whenever you'd move during the day to go on patrol, one person in front had a corn knife—a big machete we called it—and they would just chop through the brush so we could walk.

Because you always chopped through the brush that was the thickest because you never walked in an area that was a clear place to walk because that's where they had a lot of booby traps and mines set up. And just like the rice paddies, there are squares of rice paddies and they have mounds of ground and it'd be really easy to walk on the top of the mounds of ground when you walk through rice paddies. But that's where they would plant the mines and ground bombs, so we had to like walk

[5] A geographic region of southern Vietnam with a dense population and many rice paddies, the Mekong Delta experienced heavy fighting during the Vietnam War (Marks 735).

through water. And it was just the way that—you never took the easy path because that's where they always put the booby traps.

Yes, we lost a lot of guys from these booby traps that still you can't protect yourself from all of them. That was just something that happened quite often, and I guess the biggest conflict we ran into was like about 4th of July of that year. We went out on a patrol that we had set up kind of a base camp, and then they said that there was what they'd call "local Charlies"—or people that took up the weapons and the cause for this and that weren't dressed, they were dressed right like Vietnamese.

That was the hardest thing to determine Vietnamese versus Charlie because a lot of them, the dress was no different and you couldn't tell. And then, what we did is, we were supposed to confront a bunch of them that they thought was in that area. So we went out and didn't take our shovels to dig in bunkers and so, because that was heavy. A lot of that was heavy, you that all on your back and that was heavy. It was hot; you sweat bad. So yes, this was no big deal. We were gonna go out and check that all out and be back by evening. But what happened is, a miss—something got missed like it does a lot of times—and we ran into a regiment of Communists that was—. I mean they're all dressed in uniform. So we got trapped down for a couple days, and took a terrible lot of tragedies. And by time it all got done, we were gonna be overrun. That was pretty much the way it was gonna be.

Because I only had one time while I was over there where the call was to—that we were gonna be overrun. It just slips my mind now, but it said to just be called to fasten a bayonet on the end—that means there's a knife-like thing just lying on the end. And that was for hand to hand combat. That call went out and—cause they thought that they were so close.

Then our commanding lieutenant who was in charge decided to call for military support close in. I mean, we had military support, but he gave them basically our position that we were in, figuring if the military would come and drop the bombs right on top of us that they would back off, and that was the only way to stop this. Well then, when they started flying in, we backed up just enough that most of the regiment for the Vietcong either got hit or got scared and they backed off, and then we were flown out of there and got regrouped and we made it.

So that was the toughest fire fight that we were ever in—like three days and two nights really. And our trouble was is without our little spades, we couldn't dig in to get underground and make a foxhole. We had to do that kind of by hand or else with our tin plate that we had to eat off of, and so to try to get below ground a little bit so that we weren't such a target. Yes, that was the worst one we had.

ET: And that was Fourth of July of what year?

RV: That was Fourth of July of the year of '66. Then after we had some time, then they would bring us back to a base camp, what they call, which we didn't spend a lot of

time there during the year. But they took us back like for a week, so we could regroup and when we were at that base camp then other fellas would pull the perimeter so that we could sleep a whole night. The only time you couldn't sleep is if you had an incoming mortar, then you had to drop in a fox hole. But you wouldn't have to pull a guard like every hour and then sleep two hours and then an hour and… So you get your somewhat-rest again. And then after that, they had more orders for another place. They'd fly us out and we'd start all over and do it again.

It was so hard to trust anybody. A Vietnamese little kid that come running up to you… I seen soldiers shoot them because they spotted a grenade in their little basket and soon as they lift their hand off that basket, the grenade blew up. The pin was pulled and everything. And so that's what you always had to deal with: who was coming that was friend and who was not?

And that was hard after I started having little grand kids, and thinking more about that, how terrible that is, that them people believed so much in a cause that they would just sacrifice their children to blow up some soldiers. It just boggled my mind. And they were so terrible hungry. A lot of them, you got to a small village and any kind of scrap of food you had, they'd just fight over it.

When we were back at this base camp that I was telling you about, they always had a lot of garbage from all the men being there. And they would take that garbage out to a dump site, and when that truck rolled out to that dump site, it had to stop before it got to the place where they dumped it because the kids would be climbing over that truck so much that they'd either be riding over them or all. But they would just dig into this garbage and just eat it with hands full. That's how hungry a lot of them little Vietnamese were. We were there for trying to make things better for them, but then you felt really good about what you were doing and knew you had to be there. And that's what you were there for.

ET: You mentioned at these base camps that you got to sleep a lot. Did you have any other free time while you were there? To write letters or movies—watch movies?

RV: Yes, not watch movies. Base camp we had a radio. When we were out in the field, then I… during the day, I could write letters. Like my mom and my girlfriend or my fiancé would write every day. But I wouldn't get them every day. You'd get mail like maybe eight days' worth. So they got into the thing where they'd number their letters so you'd read them as the numbers came in. Cause when you got a whole pack one day and don't get anything for a couple of weeks, you got to kind of keep track that way. But that was our entertainment, like getting mail. Basically other than having radio at the base camp there, we didn't have any movies. Our free time was when we were at the base camp resting, we would sit around and we could do showers and so that they had barrels that were mounted up on stakes and that's how we showered. And they had reading material there and stuff like that. But when we were out in the field, then it was seven days, twenty-four hours. During the day,

you'd doze off once in a while when you didn't have much going on because at night a lot of times you were awake all night pulling guard, you know. Cause to get a good night's sleep of sleeping an hour than out a couple of hours and then an hour is… you don't get real restful, so then you'd catnap during the day when you had a chance when there was nothing going on. But always… yes, if we weren't making some, you know, pulling wire or digging bunkers… that was always hard and had to be done by hand. So we'd dig them by hand and things like that during the day but that… you just lost all track of time when you go seven days and the only time—special holidays you'd remember and things like that but… Christmas was really tough to be over there, Christmas time. Because then that's a time where you really miss family. A lot of times on Sunday morning we'd have a little time for—somebody would have devotions and spend a little time like that together, but always that was our Sunday. So not a whole lot different any other day, and that help when we did that because then you'd kind of get your days back in line too again.

ET: You probably got to know your fellow soldiers very well as well. Have you kept up with any of them?

RV: I… The… I had quite a few that we knew. Before I left, a number of them were wounded. And left early so I never got a home address from them or yes, some never went home. Or they went home, but they were killed. And I have kept in contact with one from New York. We were together about the whole time. He came about four months after I was there, so he stayed about four months longer than I did because it was a year tour. And so, I stayed in contact with him. The last couple of years, he's been dealing with a lot of problems where he's he had flashbacks, can't sleep. He had a real good photography job; that's been hard to keep up because he's been going to counseling and he's been getting some aid from the government to help him with that cause he thought he was alright at first but just couldn't adjust later on. But other than that, no, I didn't really keep in touch with a lot of them cause, like I said, they either went home after they were wounded and I never knew where they went or like that.

ET: You said you were over there for a whole year. Did you get the sense that everyone was counting down their days—365, 364, and on and on?

RV: Yes, that was a big thing. They referred to you when you started getting down there within weeks, then you were a "short-timer," you know. And it was… over there, when you came it was… they told you that a lot of the people got killed or wounded right away when you first got there or right before you went home. And that was because when we came over there, we were really, really stupid and really dumb.

I remember the first time we took a convoy where they were bringing me to this one base camp, and that was right after they flew me in. The sound of a sniper's bullet, I never had heard before. And in the back of this truck, when this ting sound went, everybody bailed over the edge and just dove right into the ditch before the truck

even stopped. Except for about four of us who were brand new in country, and we sat in there and kind of wondering what kind of drill this was that they jumped out there on the run like that.

But then you soon learned there that that was the thing to do to get out of sight. So that's why a lot of them at first were either illiterate to what was going on or just really uptight and then the feeling is— not from just me, but a lot of guys in my company—was we got a whole year to be here. I don't know if we're going to make this or not anyway, so let's just do what we came to do. Then when you get closer to the end, then you see the end, and then you start getting really scared and nervous and doing things you really shouldn't do. And that's when a lot of people would get either hurt or wounded. Cause I remember going on an envoy towards last, where I had to drive the truck that time and I found every sandbag I could to put on the sides and on the floorboard, because if we hit a mine I thought that steel won't come peeling up through so much. So that's the way… where in between you just never thought about that.

And one thing there was… earlier you talked about a master sergeant at the barracks when we first got into the service. The master sergeant over there was a really nice guy, and what always stands out to me is, he got right in us new guys' face one time and he told us that we were not over there to die for our country which we were always told we had to be willing to die for our country. And he got in our face and he says, "You're not here to die for your country. You're here to make the enemy die for his." And that was a saying that just stayed with us all the time, and that was right. I mean, we were going to try to make him die for his and save our own.

ET: Oh goodness, there's so much there. Your unit—every man— came from several different places so you had a bunch of different backgrounds there. You had people probably from farms like yourself and from cities. Can you explain a little bit about the diversity in there?

RV: Yes, it there was a lot of difference. I was with a lot Southern boys that came from the Carolinas, Virginia, and all that. There were always fun to be around because their language and their dialogue was kind of different, but they were good, hardworking kids. And our company commander—and there was some from New York and all that—and you could tell some guys hadn't really did much physical work, hadn't trained themselves to really bear down and "grin-and-bear-it because this is not good." And so our company commander, on a number of occasions, he would just fly off the handle about some of these guys not pulling their weight and he always said—we had four companies in our battalion—and he always said, "You give me two companies of farm boys," he said, "and I will take on anybody," he said. And so he was always pretty proud of the guys that would really bear down and do it, and that ended up being a lot of more the country people that were used to physical work and things like that. That was about the only thing always. We had a lot of nationalities and everything else, so that all blended together. But when it all

came down to when it really got tough, you all pretty much watched each other's back and just did what you had to do.

ET: Was there any real sense of what was going on back in America when you were in Vietnam? Did you hear about the anti-war movement or the beginnings of it?

RV: Yes, the good ol' actress Jane Fonda[6] did a good job of that. She was on Radio Hanoi. She was up there and whenever you did hear a radio, she was always letting us know how stupid we were for doing that. And I'm not going to get into a lot of her because I have no respect for her, but we did hear about the marches, people back here that were protesting and that's really hard because it's like "What are we here for when they're feeling that way?" And in that war, a lot of them felt that we were stupid for going. I mean, we got drafted. If we didn't get drafted, we were gonna get thrown in jail. I mean, we *had* to go. And so we felt kind of boxed that here we have to do this, but yet back home they're saying we're stupid for doing it. And ladies like her that were really American citizens, and they would go over to that country and then they would try to help the enemy by just running our spirits down. That's basically what she tried to do, and to make us, you know, give up and not keep doing what job we were. If they would have—if the politicians and so would have left us to do what we wanted to do—but we had too many hands tied there. So it was just a matter of stay, do your term, do what you're told, and go back. It's sad that we were pulled out and let that whole country be overrun, but it ended up being that way.

ET: Did you hear about people encouraging men who have been drafted to go to Canada, or to burn their draft cards and get rid of them?

RV: That was quite a lot that, yes, you heard a lot about that. And I got to the point where after I come out of the war— or conflict they called it then—I'm not so sure I wouldn't have even encouraged my sons to do that. And maybe I would have had a change of heart later on, but right afterwards seeing how we were treated there and how we didn't really accomplish anything—they didn't let us accomplish anything—we felt like it was really a waste.

A lot of young men died for not a good reason. And so a human person's mind starts thinking, "Boy, I wouldn't let my son get into that situation." Now like, it's a different situation with Iraq. I feel way different. I feel like we need to be there again, you know?

But after I got back… Part of the thing when I got back, we flew into Oakland, California, and we left our weapons overseas. That was the first time for a whole year I was without a weapon, and it was like, "Boy I don't have nothing here," you know. But then they told us we were going to have this steak supper—first real

[6] An American actor, Jane Fonda was vocal about her opposition to the Vietnam War. While she spoke out against the war in America throughout the late 1960s, she did not visit Vietnam until 1972. She traveled to Hanoi and broadcasted anti-war statements over Radio Hanoi (Welsh).

steak supper you could have in a restaurant, you know. It looked really great to us. They said, "We'll march you over there in formation. You're still military; you stay marched." We started marching over there; protestors had drawn up alongside of the street and they basically spit at us and told us how stupid we were for being over there. And a lot of us really did not enjoy that meal very much because of that.

I think they knew that was going to happen when they marched us over there or they wouldn't have said, "You will stay in formation, and you will be soldiers." Because I think somebody would have got hurt really bad if they would have just let us, you know, walk over there on our own because it was so downgrading.

ET: And I'm sure they were yelling some very hurtful things.

RV: Oh yes, it was a lot of—yep. Just all kinds of stuff. And accusing us of everything. Baby killers—we were baby killers and all that. And like I said earlier, it happened and it's not nice to see, but there's no option a lot of times. If they let them little ones come at you with a grenade, and you get into a bunch of army soldiers, a lot of people are going to die. So there was a lot of them that were shot— and real little guys shot— but they kept pretty much reminding you of that when we got back.

ET: And did you ever get the sense in the anti-war movement that it was not so much that they were against the war because it was immoral, it was more because they didn't want to go?

RV: Yes, there was that the ones that were preaching it didn't want to go, you mean? Yes, more so than… Well just like now with the Iraq war we have, the ones that are over there say they got to be over there doing their job. It's the ones that are here doing that or saying we shouldn't be there. That happened there too. I mean, it was the people that had no clue but they just wanted to march for some reason I think. And then they knew very little about this war, and so they just got on a drum and started beating it that it was something we weren't supposed to be into. And they're always heard the loudest it seems like.

We knew there was a lot of people that were really praying for you and so back home, but they're not heard as much as these anti-war people. But yes, there was a lot of people that sent encouraging letters and all that too. So you had that to hang onto and just overlook the other.

ET: Right, right. What day did you get back?

RV: I come back… Oh, it's been a little while ago.

ET: That's all right.

RV: April of…

ET: ’67?

RV: Yes. ’67 of April. That’s when I did my full year and then came back.

ET: And you were discharged there in California?

RV: No. Flew into California there, and then I had really six months to do yet on my two year endraftment. So then they sent us home for a month furlough, and then after that I got my orders that I had to report to Fort Hood, Texas. And then I went there for about the last 6 months. And there I was trained how to clean a weapon, how to shoot a weapon, and things like that. Which was a long few months because had guys teaching me how to keep a weapon clean that had just come out of officer’s schooling and never been in any action. And here we come away from a whole year’s worth and then they’re going to try to tell us how to keep a weapon and be physically fit for that. So that’s how I finished off after being there for a few months.

ET: After you arrived back home, did you start to notice Vietnam in the media and the news more? And started paying more attention to it?

RV: Really, that time I was back in Fort Hood, then we had a lot of time to watch news coverage and all that. Yes, then it really seen a lot of it. When I got discharged from the army and came back to the local area here, they had a big celebration for me, way different than what the news media was having in the bigger cities and so.

I didn’t have anything around here that protested it, other than I went to a Legion[7] meeting to become a Legion member or they asked me to go and check it out. There I had just… that was one of the first meetings I could have went to after I was discharged. A couple of older fellas that were in World War 2, they asked me where I was and all that, and I said I was with the Vietnam War. And they said, “Correction. It was not a war, that was a conflict. You were not in a war like ours.” And I kind of felt I had seen a lot of the things as much as some guys did that was were in the war. And I couldn’t hardly believe that somebody that had served in a different war could think that a different war was any less dramatic. World War 2 was bad, but I kind of felt that I had been through some stuff to where it was a war not a conflict. So I kind of just talked back and thought with all this stuff about how a lot of people were against the war, against people that went—I just clammed up and thought people don’t know that’s what I did and that’s fine too. And so I didn’t do anything with it; I didn’t go back to the Legion until a couple years ago and just kind of just sat tight on it and let things be.

ET: So you stayed pretty much silent for a long time?

[7] Officially known as the American Legion, this group is the world’s largest veterans’ organization. Many towns have local posts (Ohlbrich and Ross).

RV: Yes. Yes. I had some flashback—not flashbacks but nightmares. My wife said it was kind of hard to wake me up because she didn't want to get too close because sometimes I would jump up pretty fast, violent. Things like that for a while. I came back with a fungus on my feet—a jungle rot. Got that cleared up and then just kind of kept away from any of these movies or so that would bring some of that back. And then just finally just kind of got to the point where I forgot about it, and then a few years ago I went back to a Legion meeting and then they talked really highly there that we should talk about this, bring it out for our kids, our grandkids or they'll never know what it was about or what we went through. And so then it started thinking that maybe I should open up on some of that stuff and that's where it came to this point.

ET: That's true. Back when you were in Vietnam, did you have any contact with the South Vietnamese troops? I know some units had to serve with them. Did your unit have to do that?

RV: We had not so much as a number of them, but like four or five that would be interpreters or that would help us with like the landscape. And that always seemed to work pretty good. The ones we worked with were really determined for the cause. Some of the companies had some that they worked with that when it really come down to getting nitty-gritty with the firing and with bombs and all that, that they would just take off and they would leave you. Where the ones that we had stayed really, right with us. We had things where like we had barbers that were Vietnamese that would come into our unit and cut hair during the day. And then we them that they were shot in the night because they were really Vietcong—Vietnamese cutting our hair during the day trying to find out about what our base camp was like and then at night they were shooting mortars around the outside in to us. So we had them and you always had to be aware of that. Another thing you always had to be aware of is we had cleared an area and set up a base camp which was secure, and they had so many underground tunnels[8], rooms, and then we found out later on that they were getting in to the inside. And they came right up out of the ground at night like in the middle of that because they had rooms underneath. And you didn't know who they were because they could pop up and be dressed in Vietnamese clothes in the inside and you wouldn't know if they were with you or against you. So that was really tough—you just didn't have any front lines and you didn't have any uniforms that you could say this color uniform is Vietcong. And Vietnamese all dressed alike—it could be men, women, children.

ET: And some of these tunnels were very extensive. They mentioned that some covered an entire region—it was a bit like a gopher in a hole.

RV: You're right. And the reason they got that big is because the French were in there before us and they just—the Vietcong—just dug underneath and dug underneath. And put ammunition, and ammunition sites underneath. They had food underneath

[8] The Vietcong and the North Vietnamese Army strategically used tunnels during the Vietnam War. As Van Regenmorter indicates, the tunnel systems were complex and often vast (DiMarco).

there. They were dug in so deep that it was so hard to get them out. But years and years before we got there, they had been doing this all. So you're right, that was very, very big.

We had guys that would call—we call them tunnel rats—they would crawl into a tunnel with a rope and you held onto the rope and they would go in there and see what they'd come out of. And a lot of times they'd get into there and find whole rooms that there was nobody in there, but yes then we could blow them up and do all that. And a lot of times the guys that volunteered for tunnel rats, in our company they were guys that had either received a "Dear John" letter[9] from home from a girlfriend, their parents or something just didn't have much to do with them, and they didn't really have a lot to lose. So they were always the ones… cause that was not a good situation, to crawl into a hole like that where you didn't know what was down there.[10]

ET: It really kind of depended on the South Vietnamese themselves—whether they stood and fought or whether they ran.

RV: Yes, that's what it did. Because a lot of them weren't convinced that this was the answer, so they'd act like they were really gonna give you support and then they'd analyze the situation and find out what could happen if they did this and Charlie would find out and they'd be dead. So they would just scatter. And you can't blame them for all that either, because they were the ones that were gonna stay there. I mean, things weren't looking so good because we'd move around scaring areas and if we'd leave the area would get overrun. So it wasn't that it was a cut-and-dried win for us.

ET: So you definitely got to see a lot of Vietnam moving from place to place?

RV: Yes, I was all over the country. They flew us with a helicopter and with cargo plane, and we'd just start there. I was the 2nd of the 18th; the division they went down there a year before. So I was one of the first ones to replace the ones that went a year before. That was the first that the 1st division was down there; so a lot of the guys we came in for had only been there a year. And that's why we had to move around so much, because they had tried to secure the whole country.

ET: And you mentioned the supply lines—you know, why you were on the Mekong Delta and how they'd brought these little boats up the rivers. How often did boats come up the rivers? Are we talking like several times a day?

RV: Well they'd always come at night and those boats would only be a little bigger than a fishing boat that has like six people in it. And they would come up with one or two people in them with like a whole bunch of ammunition or whatever. And in the

[9] See footnote 1.
[10] Scholars confirm this description of tunnel rats as often volunteering for this duty and for discovering rooms, weapons, and operations (Gillam).

dark of night and that's what they would come paddling up the river. Nothing during the day, but always at night.

And it could happen where we had it some nights were intercepted and blew up four-five boats that could've gotten through. So that's why we had to sit there mostly on guard at night, and then during the day we could relax somewhat because they wouldn't do it in the daylight. But's that all the bigger sized boats that I seen, just little waterways that they were coming up.

ET: Very interesting. Thank-you. …I'm trying to think of more questions. The government in Saigon at this time… did you really see that they were really helping their own people or did you get more of the sense that it was just kind of there and didn't really have any effect on the South Vietnamese people?

RV: See that's the way I would've looked at it then and I kind of still do, that the government wasn't really stepping up to the plate and helping those people out. So if they would've, I think that we could have held out the Communist drive from that country. You just didn't hear nothing from the government. It was just like they had a few of these people out there that were Vietnamese fighting for the government, but you didn't see supplies or anything like that. It seemed like we were doing it all, and we were bringing all the supplies in; we were bringing all the troops in. It was like, "Surely they could do a little bit more." So no, there wasn't a lot of stuff coming from the government.

ET: It's true. And you were training their troops as well. Before you even got involved militarily, you were training their troops.

RV: Yes, that's right. If they did come to help us they were very untrained. I mean, they learned a lot from us. They had no military support whatsoever to help themselves with, and that's what they had to overcome. They would come to help us, but then when they seen things getting really bad, they weren't trained to deal with it. So the best thing they could do is just take off. So that's the support you had.

ET: And these North Vietnamese regulars… they had uniforms like you said, and they had guns and weapons. Did you feel like going up against them that they were better trained?

RV: I don't think they were better trained, but they had numbers. And Fourth of July when we ran into that regiment. You're looking at a regiment of men that was trained and prepared for us to just a couple—less than a company. It was very lopsided. But we would have never tried that if we would have known what was out there. They were commanded by officers and everything; they were really militarily disciplined. So that is tough to overcome somebody in that big of numbers when you only have a few numbers. Where if it would have been a lot more of them like the Vietnamese that were just out there untrained, then we would have done a lot better against them. But a regiment of what we called the regulars from up North,

they were tough and they had one thing in mind and they were going to die for their country really in just the split of a moment. Because their life wasn't worth a lot, you know. So they do a lot of crazy things. So that's what we ran against with them regiments; they're coming in very good. But the Vietnamese, they weren't. They were just small little groups of bandits as we always called them.

ET: The North Vietnamese believed in this dream of united Vietnam, and they were fighting for that a great deal. And where you had the South Vietnamese who wanted their own country but at the same time, many of the villagers in South Vietnam, especially the rural country areas worked the rice paddies, didn't know what a Communist was, didn't really know the difference between that and a democracy.

RV: You're right. You said it very well. That's what it boiled down too. These poor peasants that were just working to feed their families, and so they didn't have a clue what was going on. So sometimes they were very, very helpful for us because they'd get clued in about that in that we were there to try to make things better, but they didn't realize what was going to happen if Communists overran them. But they didn't want that; they just wanted to be their own little… and you said that really very well. That's exactly how it was there.

ET: You mentioned their numbers. Like the Vietcong had a great deal of numbers, especially in the period when you were fighting a two year service there. And the North Vietnamese had huge numbers of soldiers, and volunteers so you would get these huge body count numbers after you gone through and had your fire fight or your conflict.

RV: Yes, if you look how many people—soldiers who died in Vietnam—of course it wasn't like World War 2 but it was an awful lot. Every day was a lot of live lost, and that's the reason: because we were up against this vicious, big head count of North Vietnamese regulars or snipers or whatever. Plus, there was no drawn line. So you had your back to cover your two sides, covering your front cover.

You were just kind of a sitting duck out there. In a jungle atmosphere, on their turf, it was a new way to fight. We just had to learn to adapt to that—that with all the booby traps. They were big on booby traps; a lot of soldiers lost their life in blew booby traps. Then we can't forget about the ones that—POW[11] that were captured—they were tortured unbelievable by the Vietcong. And there was a lot of them that never come home and died that way. So it was a war where my big fear was being captured, because I, we had heard terrible stories about that. So that's what we really worried about because of having so many regulars. Our odds were so small against theirs that that could happen on bigger scale than it did.

ET: Definitely. So there was this great fear of being captured, but did you have an instance where you actually captured more than them? Was that more likely for you

[11] Prisoners of war. More than 700 American servicemen were prisoners of the Communist forces, including the Vietcong, during the Vietnam War (Rochester).

to capture more of them or were they so quick, and they would attack so sudden and then leave again that it was almost like you'd fight for a couple of minutes and then they were gone?

RV: No, we didn't capture a lot because we ended up killing more. And because that's just the way that it happened. The ones that we captured—a lot of times were when we were out on patrols or in small groups—we would get them and capture them, get information out of them. But the ones that, in a fire fight, we never really captured anybody because, I feel that if we wouldn't have killed them they would either do it themselves or because they didn't want to be taken. So I never really seen much that we captured through a fire fight. It was always in these patrols, and then we wouldn't get a lot of real good information out of them because they didn't have a clue really what the regulars were doing up north. And the marines up north ran more in with the regulars and captured more of them. I really think they captured more of ours than we captured of them—alive, where they took Americans back alive to either torture until they got something out of them, which most of them didn't give up nothing— they gave up their lives. And then that was, course, what they wanted. They wanted to get all kinds of information that way. Where when we brought them back, we didn't torture them like they torture. I mean that's not what the United States did, but they were terrible cruel.

ET: Growing up in Orange City as farm child, going through basic training, do you ever think for one minute that you would go through all the experiences that you did?

RV: No. It never entered my mind that that would ever come to it. I guess when I was growing up, I knew about the draft. I talked with people that were in peacetime draft and served time in countries like Germany and so that were peaceful, and it didn't sound like too bad a deal – or stayed stateside. I read a lot about World War II, and I just didn't believe we'd get into another world war again. So, the Korean War, I didn't read much about or hear much about, cause I was at an age where I just didn't want to, where that was no concern of mine. I never would've dreamt I would've ended up being in Vietnam, in a situation, in a jungle like that, because it was different turf to be on, that was for sure.

ET: When you got back in 1967, are you aware of John Wayne's movie, *The Green Berets*[12], came out in 1968?

RV: Yes.

ET: Did you see that?

RV: I never seen that one.

[12] Directed by John Wayne, *The Green Berets* is notable for being one of the few films made about the Vietnam War while it was happening. The theme and message of the movie is supportive of the conflict and the U.S. government's attempt to stop communism (Kunka 295).

ET: Oh, really?

RV: I just stayed away from them kind of movies. My wife didn't like me to do that either, and I can see why because, yeah, then she didn't want no more dreams to come. I, the first movie I seen, I seen part of *Platoon*[13], and that was really not portrayed the way it was. They portrayed it like a lot of drugs were smoked, a lot of pot. Some of that was. We had people in our unit that smoked pot and marijuana and that basically sat up on the bunker at night pulling guard and lit up a cigarette. Charlie just aimed right for that cigarette, about 2 inches higher, and was right in their forehead. So we had some of that, but not terrible. I went to see Mel Gibson's one, *We Were Soldiers*[14], and he did a very, very good job on that. That portrayed, if you ever see that movie, that portrays a lot like the fire fight I was telling you about. What I appreciate about that movie too is they talked about the wives at home on the bases, when they'd come back and give the report that their husband or boyfriend was dead, how a taxi would drive up. That hit home, like man, these people at home, that are your loved ones, what are they thinking about. They don't know what you're going through other than they sit back and worry. That's the only movie that I really seen.

ET: In 1968, hearing about the Tet Offensive[15], what were you really thinking about then? Did you watch that on TV? You said you were more aware of what we going on in Vietnam after that. What were your thoughts during that?

RV: Really scared for a lot of people. That was not going to be good thing. I was tickled pink I was sitting at home. Yeah, it was, like, man, I don't know. I guess I remember listening to it and all that, and it was, I didn't know if that was, if I felt like they should keep pushing, or if we should abandon. Yea, I haven't got a lot of thoughts on that. I remember just hearing about it, but just mainly being so glad I was out and not knowing anybody real close that was in when they were having that push going on. I was just, I just stayed away from there.

ET: And it was at that point that the anti-war movement really started to become everywhere, really. Every time you would turn on the TV, I'm sure, you started to see more Vietnam, especially more of the anti-war movement. 1968 was a very big year for the anti-war movement and for Jane Fonda, as you mentioned before.

RV: I guess that's maybe why I just closed it off, and just didn't want to deal with it. That's why I can't pull a lot of memory of that era up, you know. I just stayed away from it. Yeah, it was just kind of, I remember but I really can't comment a lot

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[13] A movie from 1986 by former Vietnam solider turned director Oliver Stone, *Platoon* approaches the war critically, showing its brutality and violence (Sullivan).

[14] *We Were Soldiers* was released by director Mel Gibson in 2002. Being a few decades removed from the conflict, many consider the movie to show both realistic fighting and a heroic portrayal of soldiers (DiMare).

[15] In January of 1968, the North Vietnamese launched an attack on South Vietnam during an agreed cease-fire for the Tet holiday. The surprise attack is often considered a turning point in the Vietnam War; Americans began to lose their support for and belief in the war. (Land)

about that. I was just like, oh man, I don't want to deal with this anymore, you know? I'm done. Then you just turn off that television. And that's, a lot of that news, sometimes I think they got too much news media, that they don't let these soldiers do their job, where we didn't have that when we were there. We didn't have as many around us. They couldn't get them in to us, you know? So there wasn't news media second-guessing what you had to do. I felt bad for the guys in Iraq that are always having to deal with the news media. Even though we like to know what's going on there, I think sometimes we know more than what we really need to know back here.

ET: So it was really more adjust back to life over in America and kind of move on for you?

RV: Yep, that's what it was. We got married, and it was, like, this is over with. I'm on a reserve call, you know, if something would…I was just kind of glad when my years were up where I didn't have to be on reserve no more in case I'd have to go back. But it was like, I want to get on to it. I started farming with my wife and just moved on, just decided to kind of leave it all lay. It was done. I did my job, I went there for a year and that's it.

ET: And it took a large chunk of your life because you started basic training in 1965?

RV: Right.

ET: After you were drafted. And two months in basic training, being yelled at by the drill instructors, and then reporting here and there, and then finally getting the notice that you were heading to Vietnam, and then over there for a year, and then six months in Texas. It was a huge chunk of your life.

RV: Yeah, it was a couple years of my life that was just…it was there, you get paid, but not overly much then. I did most of my dating over mail, over letters with my wife. Like I said, after I got out, we got married and we could pick up and start off where if I wouldn't have went there for those two years, a lot of things would've been different. I could've enjoyed life back here, dating instead of my letters. You're right. It was 2 years that was just kind of lumped out of there. I'm just thankful I came back, that I was never wounded. There's so many from my company that either came back in body bags or that have some wounds or are carrying for life a missing foot or something like that. I'm just thankful that God brought me back healthy, so called healthy.

ET: You weren't wounded or anything like that. You got out of there without a scratch.

RV: Well, there were scratches, but they were not wounds. I got out of there with just a jungle fungus on my feet, basically. I grew up. Two years, I had to grow up. When you go that quick out of high school and have to go up against that all, you

come back and you feel like you've done a lot, you grew up a lot in those couple years.

ET: Do you ever wonder what your life would've been like if you hadn't been drafted to Vietnam? That maybe, you know, you could've had your farm earlier, like you said you could've dated?

RV: Yeah, I've thought about that. I would've thought that I would've gotten into business earlier, that would've helped financially. Like I said, we could've dated, wouldn't have had to write all those. Turned out good this way, too. We had a lot of letters we wrote. I'm not sad I did. I wouldn't want to do it again. I'm thankful my boys fell in an era there was no draft and nothing really going on. It would've been hard for me to send a boy who was drafted and knew he was going into an Iraq[16] or something after I had been through this. That would be really hard. My dad hadn't served in the Army. He sent me off with really not knowing what I could be up against either.

ET: Is there any part of your Vietnam experience where you just can't find any meaning in it? Or it's really hard for you still today to understand?

RV: The part I don't understand is why they didn't let us make some headway there. Why they moved us around so much and we worked so hard to clear an area, and then they'd move us out and we'd just get overrun. It was like they sent a lot of boys over there. It was a lot of manpower put into it. I guess I don't know why we couldn't've, with the commanders and generals and all that, come up with a better strategy than what they did. That seems so useless. Like it was just, we called it over there, just a waste of boys' lives. I mean, that was all they did. They fought for an area, cleared it out, left it, and was overrun. It was like, why did we do that? That part of it, I just think that somehow or other, it was tackled right with strategy of the way they were going to go in there and do it.

ET: Have you ever visited the Vietnam Memorial, The Wall[17], as it's commonly called?

RV: I've been to the Vietnam traveling one, not the one. . . . They had it in LeMars and Sioux Center. I went to both of them and looked up some names on there that I had. We went to Branson, Missouri, and they have a nice memorial there. We went to that. So things like that I enjoy going to and looking at. It's a hard time because then you see these names on the wall and think, it could've been my name on the wall, why did these boys have to die for that? That was the cause.

ET: I know some Vietnam veterans have actually returned to Vietnam. Would you ever consider that or not?

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[16] The United States invaded Iraq in 2003; when this interview was conducted in 2007, the conflict was ongoing, and America still had combat troops in Iraq ("War in Iraq").

[17] Located in Washington, D.C. on the National Mall, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is commonly referred to as The Wall (Evans-Pfeifer).

RV: No. I just talked a fellow a couple Saturdays ago who had returned. He thought it was really good. He was over in Vietnam on an air base and never really seen any action. He said it was really fun to go there. Some of Vietnam has changed into motels, hotels, resort areas. They are trying to bring a lot of people over there now to vacation and so. He said they went into another area where, back roads that they knew. They thought it would be fun, they put on some old camouflage gear with their old battalion stickers and so and came to this one little town and he said an interpreter came out who could speak some American. He told them they needed to get out of there because these people held a grudge for that company because a lot of their relation was killed and died. They felt it was because of the Americans. He thought that was really interesting where I have no desire to go back there. That is one place that would maybe be the last stop in the world I want to really go back to.

ET: Vietnam has changed a great deal since then. They've said it's become much more tourist.

RV: That's right, that's what he said too. They're really pushing to get the tourists in. I just, I figure a year there is enough, even though it's not that way now. I just wouldn't have any desire to go back.

ET: Thank you very much for your time. It's wonderful listening to you and getting to know your experience over in Vietnam. Thank you very much again for your service there. I'm sure when you first got off that air base in California and you were not welcomed the way you expected to be, and I'm very sorry about that. Thank you very much, especially for sharing your story. It means a lot to me. Thank you.

RV: Thank you for taking the time investigating this and trying to document that. I appreciate that. You mentioned that when we came into Oakland we weren't very well looked at there. Branson, Missouri has done a lot to welcome the vets from Vietnam back and make them feel really, really welcome down there. Last year they had a Vietnam welcome party where they feel that they weren't given the welcome either that they needed so they gave it to them there. A lot of people go out of their way to make them feel better about that now.

ET: Did you hear about that big Vietnam veterans' homecoming parade in Chicago[18], I think it was in 1981 or so, to help make up for the fact that so many were so unwelcomed when they got back?

RV: Oh no, I didn't hear about that one. So they had one in '81 in Chicago too?

ET: Yes.

[18] In 1986, the city of Chicago hosted a Welcome Home parade for Vietnam veterans. The parade lasted almost five hours, included almost 200,000 marchers, and was attended by 500,000 spectators (Gregory).

RV: That was good.

ET: And they allowed the veterans to march down…

RV: Oh, did they?

ET: Down the Navy Pier and everything. I'm focusing on that for a paper, investigating that. Some veterans say yeah, we were unwelcomed but we weren't spit on or we were mostly just called dirty names. Sometimes being called a dirty name is enough of a spit.

RV: Yes, it is. I feel really happy about the way they welcome the Iraq ones that come back now. They broadcast it on TV and they have a nice thing for them. I think that's really nice. I wish we would've had a little bit more of that. That's the way that was. I'm glad they're doing that now, in Chicago and Branson.

ET: You mentioned that when you got back here in Orange city you had a much better homecoming.

RV: Oh yeah. Here, everybody was glad to see you. They came to, we had a thing in the gym, and they filled the gym up. Once I got back here, there was no anti-protestors. They were just all glad to see us. That helped me, being in a rural area like this. Some guys that came back to like Chicago or bigger towns, the community didn't' stand behind them. They never got anything. I was fortunate for that.

ET: You said 2nd battalion? Or was it 2nd infantry?

RV: I was with the 1st division, second of the 18th.

ET: First division, second of the 18th? Okay, getting that down. That's very important. Do you often meet with other Vietnam veterans? Or is just at The Wall, the traveling one like in Le Mars, that you usually see them?

RV: I see the local guys that have served. A lot of them haven't served in the infantry. They were either in the Air Force or another division. I don't run across a lot that were in the infantry then. From this area there wasn't a lot that went to Vietnam. The ones that like our church area or our town area, that if they went to Vietnam, then we talk once in a while about it. When we went to The Wall and so, you don't know who is standing next to you and what they were. So not real close buddies that I have that I keep in touch with. It's just that one in New York that I keep in touch with basically.

ET: You mentioned earlier when we were talking about your basic training and you were given the assignment of going to Vietnam and you called your parents and you told your mother you were going to Vietnam, she was silent. Did that suddenly tick

something in your mind that maybe you were heading into something that you weren't quite ready for?

RV: Yes, I think that was the first time that it was really saying that they've been watching this closer than I and they know more than I know so maybe I better look into this. I didn't bother me so much to call and say it but after I got off the phone I started looking into it because the silence is just like, I could kind of read my mom's mind, like oh no. That had to be heart-wrenching for them too. That's when I first really got started looking at this is maybe not a very good place.

ET: Were there a lot of other guys in basic training who went off to Vietnam, did you talk to them that maybe they knew a bit more about Vietnam than you did?

RV: Out of the maybe 40 guys that, there was only about 7 or 8, if I remember right, that got the orders from Vietnam. A couple of them were really glad to go because they wanted that action. Some other ones were more like me, just really don't know what that's all about. Most of them were just jumping up and down that they were going to Germany or staying stateside. The ones that did get kind of found each other, and I remember we talked about it one night. Some of them were under the impression that this was a good opportunity and I want to go, but most of them were what is this all about? We really don't care to go here either. That's what [inaudible].

ET: Were the other guys who gotten enlistment to go to Germany or stay in America, did you ever get the feeling that they felt sorry for you and for those who went to Vietnam?

RV: Some of them guys must have been pretty much knowledgeable of it. They right away said, boy, we're glad we're not going there and we just really hope that everything goes good for you. They were, what I would call, encouraging, that I visited with afterwards. Most of them were very encouraging but very relieved they weren't going.

ET: I see. And you found out you were going to Vietnam in North Carolina?

RV: In Virginia.

ET: Virginia. Okay. Sorry. It was a long flight from Virginia to, did you go straight to Vietnam or did you have to stop over?

RV: No, see then I came home for a month, I think. A whole month they gave us. They knew we would be gone a year, and we wouldn't get no furloughs in that year. So they gave a month. I was just so glad to be coming home that when I came home, but the month that I was home, it was different ones like different uncles and so that had served in service or in the war, it was kind of hard to talk to them because you could read their eyes, like I hope this all goes good and had a lot of concern. Some

of the relation that has never been in the service, they were, you could tell that oh yeah, you just be careful and all that, but they didn't say much more than that. I could really read the ones who had served time in the service. They were very, very concerned and everything about it. None of them didn't push the panic button, oh this is terrible or anything like that. You could just see the concern. They didn't put the fear into you. They just had a lot of concern.

ET: It's just like that major who told you, "No, you're not here to die for your country. You're here to make them die for their country."

RV: Yeah, that just stayed with me. That was something that always…You always hear that you've got to be willing to die for your country. Well, he said you're not here to die for your country. You're here to have them die for theirs. He was a good officer.

ET: You mentioned earlier when you first got over to Vietnam and they handed you your weapon, had you ever handled a gun before?

RV: We had to do that in basic training and in AIT[19] up in Seoul. We had qualified for our sharp shooter badges and everything. We had qualified for all of that. We had gas training in case we ran into gas. We were taught a little bit of hand-to-hand combat. They had us prepared as well as you could in that short amount of time. When we got our weapons up there, we knew what to do with them. We knew how to clean them. We felt real good with them. It was kind of a different feeling when they had you a weapon pretty quick and say now you never leave that from you, you keep it by you all the time. So it was something like until we got on the plane to fly home, that thing was closer to us than, about as close as skin. That stayed right with us.

ET: Your first duty over there right away was to hop around Vietnam and figure out the area.

RV: Like I said, I started out in the mess, serving in the mess hall, and that was to bring in food to the people that were hopping around. But then after a few months I ended up being on the ground. I just spent a lot of time flying in these helicopters and on ground and in the cargo planes, in the belly of a cargo plane. It was a lot of different ways they transported us around there. We were just always jumping.

ET: You mentioned the smell when you first got over to Vietnam. I'm sure there were other things you really had to adapt to quickly too, like you said. You either die right away because you're dumb or you died when you were closer to going home, just not used to the situation quite yet, it took a little time.

RV: It was a lot of adapting. When you were back here, you always have running water, you have showers, you can clean up. There, you're in a country that was terrible

[19] Military acronym for advanced individual training.

humid, terrible hot, you're dirty, crawling on the ground. Showers . . . If it rained, you basically found some soap and took your shower in the rain. When you were back at base camp, you had a little bit more privacy with a tank above your head and a shower stall. You did that to keep yourself clean. You slept under the stars, you slept on the ground. It was a year of not too many luxuries. When you come back, you really appreciate it all.

ET: And you mentioned you had fungus. Was that pretty common over there, people getting sick, lice and stuff? [Inaudible]

RV: Not so much lice. Fungus, because we were walking in water. Our feet were wet all the time, socks were wet. You only had one set of clothes, and that was what you had on you. Every chance we got, we tried to dry our socks out and our shoes. Shoes were mesh so that they could breathe and let air in, that's what they tried to do. But then your feet would get this fungus. Many times at night you'd have these leeches that would get on you. You'd have to look in the morning because these bloodsuckers would be on you, just sucking your blood. Then somebody else, a cigarette would usually would drop them right off, so they wouldn't leave their sticker in you. We dealt with that, and then of course, they had the poison scorpions. If you had your shoes off at night, you always tipped your shoes upside down before you'd slide your foot in because there could be one of them in there. Black ants, fire ants, they were horrible. You could sit by a tree when you were on patrol and if you didn't realize it, then they'd start getting in you. Basically you'd strip down to nothing to get rid of them and get them off of you because they bit so terrible bad, so you had them to deal with. We dealt with pythons, cobra snakes. They'd be hanging in a tree or something when you went through, that kind of stuff. A lot of sewer rats. Back at base camp, if you had a hole dug for your foxhole, for incoming mortars and you hadn't used it for a few nights, if you would jump in there after you had some incoming rounds, you could be sharing that with a couple sewer rats down there. That was things that were not so nice.

ET: You were fighting the terrain, the weather, and the wildlife, as well as the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese regulars.

RV: And then the monsoon season. You've heard of that?

ET: Mm hmm.

RV: Rain, every day. Just rain, rain, rain. You'd sit at night, out in patrol, and on guard, and you'd sit there wet, with a poncho over you. You'd be wet during the day, just wet all the time. It was not cold wet, but it was just wet. We had a lot of different…then when that was over, then the heat. The heat and the sun. A lot of different things.

ET: Definitely. All the wetness allowed the fungus to grow, allowed people to get sick oftentimes. Kind of makes you sometimes wonder how the villagers stayed so healthy.

RV: That's right. They had a roof on their head. Another thing, we could've took a 7-day R&R[20] there, or a 3-day rest and recuperation in country. I never took the 7 day one where you could fly back to Hawaii or somewhere. I was afraid it would be hard to come back, hard to leave your loved ones. I took the 3-day one, and there was a beach there. That was 3 days where you didn't have to have your weapon. A company pulled perimeter duty around there so it was always safe. Then you sat and ate good food. That was 3 days of really precious luxury. That was only 3 days of the year. That was even hard enough to strap your fatigues back on and go back in the field again after that.

ET: Let alone going to Hawaii, a really nice place like that.

RV: That's why I decided not to do any of that because I maybe wouldn't want to come back.

ET: And R&R was usually in one of the cities, the bigger cities like Saigon?

RV: Well, no. R&R was out of country. That was in Thailand, a lot of guys went to Thailand or Hawaii or any other place other than Vietnam. The 3-day ones stayed only down by the Maikon Delta. And that was the only secured area. If you wanted to go on the 3-day one, you had to go there. Saigon wasn't really safe, Bien Hoa wasn't safe, nothing was safe to be at.

ET: Do you get the sense, when you were moving around, you came across some villages of course. Did you ever find abandoned villages during the Hamlet Program[21], where they would move all these different villagers from different villages then mesh them into one big village? So you'd come across those sometimes?

RV: About one time, I think. That's all I did. It was always, we wouldn't really get into a village very much. It was just jungle. We had to clear the area out before them to make a thing. A lot of times when we got that area cleared out, then they would bring a company of soldiers or another division in there. Then that division would branch out from that secured area and they would run into a lot of these villages that had either moved or something. So they ran into more of that than what our company did. Our company was to set up safe areas.

[20] Military acronym for rest and recuperation or rest and recreation.
[21] The Strategic Hamlet Program was designed to curb insurgency and provide protection for people living in the rural areas of South Vietnam by relocating people to villages where the government and military had a larger presence (Hunt).

ET: I see. Did you really have a lot of contact with other units? Did you ever…not really?

RV: The only one would be a cab division which is on tracks. That sometimes they gave us a ride or pulled guard with us. They'd go down a road and help keep our security then when we were moving. That was the only thing we ran into. We had a lot of contact with a lot of pilots and gunners on airships, on choppers. Got to know some of them. When they fly you around enough, then you would know the gunner sitting by the door or something. They'd drop you off. It was really hard because sometimes you'd get to know some of these gunners and you'd know they had quite a bit of time there, then the next time they'd pick you up to move you and they weren't on there. You'd say, "Well, where did he go?" They'd say, "Well, he was shot." Then it was like, oh man. We'd get to know people that way.

ET: In hopping around, you mentioned how booby traps were really big, especially in those easy to walk areas, especially where you could tell where a path had already been made. You would try to avoid that. Did you really run more into mines than the punji sticks[22]?

RV: I guess I would see most…the punji sticks? That was where they'd have a pit in the ground with all these sticks then foliage over the top and then you'd step into it. The one that did the most damage to our company was, we had our sergeant for our squad was one that…he would pull point. Point is when you go through the jungle, the first one with a corn knife, he's called a point. Then you switch off because you get so terrible tired. You just keep rotating around, the back one goes front [inaudible]. He was one, he didn't have to do that since he was a sergeant, but he did what his men would. He only had a few weeks left, and here he took his turn chopping, and he chopped through a rope that a ball of punji sticks on a big ball came down and decapitated him. He had a wife and two little boys at home. That was really hard because he was so close and just never made it. He was determined that he was going to do whatever he made his men do. He died for it.

So there was a lot of them. There was a few mines but most of them was them kind of, what you might say, any peasant could make. That's what they had to work with. We weren't up against the regulars or the hard-core. They used the mines and the mortar and all that.

ET: But I'm sure you've heard horror stories, not just about being captured but about the bouncing betties[23], they would step on them and blow a person in half. I'm sure those stories got around from unit to unit. While you were on a base camp, you would hear stories about stuff like that.

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[22] Punji sticks, or stakes, were sharpened stakes, often of bamboo, designed to pierce people who fell on them. As Van Regenmorter states, at times there were attached to balls designed to drop from vines or trees (Tucker).

[23] Originally development during World War II, "bouncing betties" refers to German S-mines; these land mines exploded when pressure was applied, typically when stepped on ("Land Mines").

RV: We had it, when they did move us a couple of times with a convoy, then they said mines on the road that the guys missed and blew up a truck up. They had so much explosive that it would blow all the tin work and everything and just curl it up around the people that were in the seat. I mean, they were so mangled. That was the most mines I saw individual guys get blown up in. Else it was always these punji sticks.

ET: When Richard Nixon became president and he promised this, you know, peace with honor, what did you think about that? Did you think that he really had this plan to get out of Vietnam?

RV: Yes. I guess I just kind of thought he was between a rock and a hard place. We had to get out of there, but how do you get out of there and not hold your dignity or honor about it? At the time, I thought it's never gonna happen. You can't get out of there and not say we were overrun and we lost. I was so hoping we could've gotten out of there with a little more dignity and left it a little bit more stable.

ET: They said that when they tried to leave, the very last helicopter that was pulling American people out of Vietnam, there were rife everywhere, surrounding the US Embassy and everything As they took off, you know, the place was completely swarmed, all the streets, it's like a mass riot in the entire city of Saigon.

RV: It was just like "boom," it was all overrun then. It was sad. I don't know how else they would've did it either.

ET: It was a combination of where the North Vietnam officials didn't want to negotiate really and at the same time America wanted to save face and didn't, wanted to keep South Vietnam independent, but suddenly it started to look like that was no longer an option.

RV: No, it wasn't, it wasn't. I think early on if we would've been more aggressive, we could've backed North Vietnam up and made some kind of a truce and a line somewhere, kind of like South Korea, North Korea. But some things were just done not right there.

ET: So it's unfortunate it ended the way it did, but…

RV: Yes, that's what I feel too. It's sad.

ET: But it's too late to change it now.

RV: Yes, that's right. We can just learn by it. That's what we have to do, learn by it.

ET: When you got back from Vietnam and you stayed pretty silent about it, did you feel a bit of a sense of relief when America finally pulled out of Vietnam, or was it just you really didn't know what to feel?

RV: I guess I felt bad that we weren't ending something we thought we could win. So we're really leaving. But I felt good that they were getting out of there because I just didn't think they had a strategy to win that thing the way they were going. So why sacrifice any more boys? Let's just get out now. Yeah, I felt bad we had to get out of there and come up saying we come up short on it. The American soldiers, they could've beat that. We're better than any other nation, more equipped. The turf, like I said, the way they went at it, just some things were done wrong. We could've won that. The heart of the soldiers was there to win it. They could've won it. We wanted to win it. It just wasn't meant to be, the way they moved things around.

ET: Exactly. And North Vietnam wanted to win very badly. And some in the Vietcong of South Vietnam wanted to win it as well. So you had this battle of the wills, literally. And the scary thing about it is they had the numbers on their side and they were very determined. You said they had, for some of their tactics, they'd send human waves at base camps, wave after wave of people, and they would be mowed down.

RV: That meant nothing to them, to just sacrifice a whole wave of people. You're right. If the South Vietnamese would've had the determination that the north Vietcong did, the North Vietnamese, then we would've had something to go on too. We just felt like the Americans were the one with determination here, and we're trying to drag the South Vietnamese along. How much more must we pull them along in their country? We're over here for them, and if we can't get them to really step up with a backbone, then maybe it's time to get out of it. Yeah, but if they would've had the determination that North Vietnam did, we could've come up with a win on that.

ET: Do you feel like that anti-war movement had a big impact on the morale of troops over in Vietnam?

RV: I think it had it on some, some not. A lot of times it does and you don't even know it. You just get sick of hearing that. And you think yeah, I guess why am I here? If you would just hear the other way, how glad they were that you were willing to go over there, I think it gives you a little more motivation. It has to work somewhat on your mind.

ET: And the anti-war movement usually blamed President Johnson, especially, for the war because he escalated it. He started the ground troops being sent there and the bombings, of course. Did you really feel that he was more guilty of the war than maybe Kennedy and Eisenhower, or was it just again that he was caught between a

rock and a hard place?

RV: I guess at the time I didn't think much about it. But I've been reading some articles after that now, and it's always easier to condemn after the fact, you know, hindsight. But it sounds like, on some of them articles, that Johnson escalated a lot of that and was a cause for a lot of guys really ending up losing their lives because of the way he wanted things done there. According to some of them articles, you'd almost be led to believe that Johnson would have been better if somebody else would have been in his position, changed a little bit too. There's a lot of people really critical about him and what happened while he was in the term of office. And you know how that goes. Some of it is how whoever is writing the article portrays it all too. I didn't know much about it when I got out, I didn't hear much about the president's parts. Later on, when I've been reading some articles and starting to draw some other conclusions, but who knows what they really are, I guess. Depends on a person behind a pen too.

ET: Were you a bit shocked at the time too when President Johnson said he wasn't going to run for re-election?[24]

RV: No, I guess I was relieved. I thought we had better people to take charge than what he was doing. No, and then I wondered, I guess, if part of that was that he felt that he dropped the ball too, that's why he didn't want to run again.

ET: How did you feel about Robert McNamara[25] coming out after quitting his job, saying the war is immoral, it's not going anywhere? Did that make you angry, or did you have a sense of he's kind of right?

RV: Yes, I guess that sums it up. I guess some of me says yeah, he's kind of right but there's another place that feels different. That's kind of how I would sum it up.

ET: It's still this very complex mixture of feelings.

RV: Yes, that's the way it is. To sort that all out, sometimes you can't really get that done.

ET: Yes. I was a bit surprised when you said you hadn't seen *Green Berets* by John Wayne, especially considering it was, considering all the Vietnam War movies today, it is actually the only really pro-war movie that actually came out during the Vietnam War. I guess you could really expect that from John Wayne. Did you see some of his World War II films growing up?

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[24] In 1968, President Lyndon Johnson surprised many in the nation when he announced he would not seek reelection. He claimed the country was too divided and too partisan, and some feel he would not have done well in the primary elections (Graff).

[25] Robert McNamara was the Secretary of Defense from 1961-1968, serving under both Kennedy and Johnson. During his tenure, he grew doubtful that the United States could win the conflict, and he clashed with General William Westmoreland about escalating the number of troops. He left office in February 1968, shortly after the Tet Offensive (Sorley).

RV: No, not really. I'd like to see that one sometime because you're right, that is the best one that is for the war. And I like John Wayne as an actor, I've seen a lot of his western ones. But I never really did see many of his movies he made about any of the wars.

ET: Did it really help knowing that there were people like Jane Fonda who were against the war and made soldiers feel bad about their . . . but even though Jane Fonda was in the anti-war movement, did you feel a bit better knowing that John Wayne and some other celebrities were on your side, for the war side, trying to build you up?

RV: Yes, a lot better. And there was a lot of them we didn't hear much about because you always hear about the negative ones and the ones that do a lot of good and try we didn't hear much about. But John Wayne and then later on Mel Gibson, he wanted to really help the Vietnam vets too. For that movie *We Were Soldiers*, he hired a general from the Army to see to it that it got told the way it really was. He had that passion too that he wanted people to realize what we went through and what real reason we were there for and how we should have appreciated that.

ET: Well thank you again for your time. I know we started to end, close the interview, then we got started up again. Thank you for telling me everything we got the time to say. Thank you again for talking to me. I really enjoyed it.

RV: Okay. I appreciate you are willing to look into this and write this up. Thank you.

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