ATTENTION: © Copyright The Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. "Fair use" criteria of Section 107 of the Copyright Act of 1976 must be followed. The following materials can be used for educational and other noncommercial purposes without the written permission of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. These materials are not to be used for resale or commercial purposes without written authorization from the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University. All materials cited must be attributed to the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University.

The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with James Rollins
Conducted by Kelly Crager
Date 19 November 2014, 20 November 2014
Transcribed by Hailey Stewart

NOTE: Any text included in brackets [ ] is information that was added by the narrator after reviewing the original transcript. Therefore, this information is not included in the audio version of the interview.

The transcription of this interview was paid for by a generous grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager conducting an Oral History Interview with Command Sergeant Major James H. Rollins. Today is 19 November 2014. I am in Lubbock, Texas, on the campus of Texas Tech University, and Command Sergeant Major Rollins is joining me telephone on his way home, Acushnet, Massachusetts. Did I pronounce that properly?

James Rollins: It's Acushnet.

KC: Okay, very good. Okay, Sergeant Rollins, I'd like to begin the interview by getting some background information from you if I can. Can you tell me when and where you were born?

JR: I was born in Hope, Arkansas. July 3rd, 1942.

KC: And what were your parents' names?

JR: My father's name was Lyndell Ray Rollins, and my mother's name was Ira Lee Kennedy and then Rollins.

KC: Okay. What did your parents do for a living there in Hope?

JR: Well, my mother was a housewife and the daughter of—her mother delivered twelve children that lived. She was one of the oldest and they lived on a farm. My father was a truck driver and just a general worker. He was illiterate and never went to school

much, and so he never really had that kind of job that you'd call a career, but his best ability was driving. He drove a truck back in the days when trucks were trucks.

KC: (Laughs) Right. Things have changed.

JR: Yeah.

KC: Did you have any siblings? Any brothers or sisters?

JR: Yeah, I had two brothers. Charles R. Rollins, a Master Sergeant for the United States Army retired. And my brother Lyndell Ray Rollins, he was the middle brother. He's since passed on. He was an Army veteran as well. Not a retiree. He served in Europe and he passed away recently.

KC: I'm sorry to hear that.

JR: So, I have two siblings.

KC: Okay. Can you tell me about what it was like to grow up in Hope, Arkansas? What was the environment like there? What sort of things did you like to do? Tell me about growing up.

JR: Well, I didn't grow up in Arkansas. We left Arkansas as I remember somewhere around my sixth birthday or eighth birthday, about 1950, and went to southern California because my family couldn't get work in Arkansas, and so we went out to California because that's where the work was at. Most of my aunts and uncles all went out there as well, and so I grew up in Burbank, California.

KC: Interesting. Okay, well, let me ask you this then, what was it like to grow up in the Burbank area?

JR: Well, Burbank, California in the 1950s was a nice place to live. There was no smog from the LA basin. It hadn't gotten up that high yet, and it wasn't so crowded and you could actually just kind of run around the town and not worry about getting molested or anything as a child, so we just kind of all grew up there. I worked a lot as when I was a kid. As soon as I got old enough, I started doing odd jobs and stuff to help with the family because my mother was basically raising us by herself. So, we all chipped in as we got older. But it still was a great childhood. I remember it fondly with my aunts and uncles around and everything, so it was nice growing up there in Burbank. Nice climate too.

KC: Yes, indeed. What sort of things did you like to do before you went to work? What sort of things did you do as a kid?

JR: Well, we just ran around and played as a gang. Played cowboys and Indians and built forts out of old cardboard boxes that refrigerators came in and stuff and played in the backyard. Then, as we got older, we all had paper routes and all the things that kids did in those days. Cut grass and trim hedges. Then, as you got older, you got more permanent jobs. Like, I worked at a carwash and I worked in a jewelry store wrapping jewelry up in presents at Christmas time, and cleaning jewelry and putting it in the windows and stuff. You know, just had different kinds of jobs around town. In those days, kids didn't have to have all kinds of permits to do jobs.

KC: Well, tell me about your schooling there. How did schooling go for you?

JR: Well, school was nice at Burbank. The schools were more upper class and we didn't have a lot of money, so I didn't go to the—we went to the school that everybody else went to. It didn't matter how much money you had, everybody went to the same school there at Burbank and the schools were nice. I don't remember a whole lot about them other than high school. I managed to run cross country in high school and I was pretty good at it. I was the number two on the track team in cross country. But then, it got kind of boring and I got tired of being the oldest in the family and having to be there. Basically, used the Army as an excuse and joined the Army in January of 1960 and left home. And I was able to provide more income to help my mom that way too, even though when I went to the Army in 1960 it was a total of sixty bucks a month is what we made when we first went it.

KC: Yeah. And you were sending some of this money home to your family?

JR: Yeah. People go into the Army for different reasons. Back in them days, a lot of it had to do with getting from home and escaping the environment they were in. Really what happened is I didn't want to grow up in southern California working in construction work. I had been around it a lot and that's where I got extra money working with my uncles in the construction field, and I just wasn't a very big guy. I only weighed like ninety pounds, so I knew that I could not live that lifestyle of working in construction work, so I joined the Army to get away. Funny thing is that I feel in love with the Army

and go out twenty-five years later with a two-year college degree and as a command sergeant major. So, I did quite well in it because I loved it.

KC: Yeah. Well, before we get you into your Army career, I'm kind of curious, growing up in California in the 1950s, the Cold War is the dominant theme in international relations and American politics. What sort of things do you remember about the Cold War?

JR: Diving under my desk and playing like a nuclear attack. We used it for two different reasons. One is for earthquakes, which happened out there quite often, but the other was that's what they told us to do in case there was a nuclear attack, as if it really would have done any good. I remember practicing what to do in case there was a nuclear attack on like LA, which is a big city near us. So, that's what I remember from the Cold War before I went into the Army. I can talk more about the Cold War after I was in the Army, but I remember that.

KC: Sure. Well, what about the Korean War? You would have been pretty young when this took place.

JR: Yeah, that's 1955. I was still in middle school or what they called junior high school in those days, so I don't remember much about Korea.

KC: Yeah. But you say that you were kind of looking for a way out of what you had seen there in southern California growing up and the Army obviously provided you with this opportunity. Were there any other reasons that you decided to join the Army?

JR: Well, I wanted to beat the draft. I didn't want to be drafted into the Marine Corps, and also I could chose a career path that way, although it didn't pan out for what I chose. But anyway, it would be more of a chose and I knew Vietnam was going on and I didn't want to be shipped over to Vietnam as a combat infantryman or a marine. I wanted to go over there as something else. So, more of my chose; my choosing. So, I joined the Army to beat the draft. I beat the draft, all right. Twenty-five years in.

KC: Right, right. Well, tell me about beginning your Army career with boot camp. Where did you go to boot camp and what was that like?

JR: Fort Ord, California. 1960. I found boot camp fun because I was in good shape because I'd been running track and so all the physical stuff was easy. A lot of guys were really having trouble with that; running and pushups and all the stuff that we did

was part of track. Especially, cross country was an endurance race, so I spent my time doing other things while these guys were trying to get in shape. I was in shape when I got there, so it helped. It was tough at the beginning—I'm going to be turning off the car, so I'll be switching the phone.

KC: Okay.

JR: You're still there, right?

KC: Yes, sir.

(Recording cuts)

KC: Okay, second set of technical difficulties, but we're going to survive. You were talking about your time there in boot camp and mentioned that it wasn't physically too demanding on you because you were in pretty good physical condition, but what about the mental aspects of it? Part of boot camp can be very demanding on a young man and a young man's mind. How did you respond to that part of boot camp?

JR: The hardest part of boot camp mentally was getting used to being away from home; you had home sickness that you have to go through. So, once I got beyond that, and my mom did help with that. You could call home, so it did help. But once I got beyond the homesickness thing that everybody has to go through when you leave home, and you even go through it later on in life when you get older, but you deal with it better. But as a young person—what was I? Seventeen and a half. Yeah. I wasn't even eighteen yet because I wasn't eighteen until July and I went in in January, so that's pretty young. But once I got beyond that, the mental part of basic training I didn't find hard. Not hard to take orders and stuff. I respected my elders because that was the way I was raised, so that helped it because I knew how to say sir already. It wasn't hard to get used to.

KC: After your boot camp, your initial training there, what did you hope to do? What did you want as an MOS [Military Occupation Code] moving forward?

JR: Actually, I joined the Army to be a cannoneer. I went from basic training to Fort Sill, Oklahoma for AIT [Advanced Individual Training] in the 105 Howitzer.

KC: Okay, tell me about your time there at Fort Sill.

JR: Well, it's hard to remember because it's so long ago, but I just remember—one of the things I do remember is sitting on the bleachers freezing to death while we're being given classes on the weapons and loading the rounds and firing it and so on and so

forth. You had to sit on bleachers. The whole gun battery would and you would sit there freezing to death because of the cold wind coming across the plains there because there's no mountains or anything to break up the weather, so you just sit there and freeze. And the uniforms weren't that great in those days. The clothes weren't the greatest for protecting you from the weather.

KC: Yeah. So, you're studying to be an artilleryman here at Fort Sill. How did you find the training here?

JR: I found it fine. It was all new to me, so it was a little bit challenging, but being a cannoneer there wasn't a whole lot you had to learn. All you had to do was learn how to load your rounds and pull the lanyard. You didn't lay the battery or anything, which is what's done by the officer. That took the mathematics and stuff. Then, if you worked in fire direction control, FDC, then you would have to learn all that stuff, but I never worked in that part. I never spent much time as an artilleryman anyway after AIT.

KC: Is that right? What became of your career as an artilleryman? What'd you do next?

JR: Well, when I went to 3rd Arm Division in Freiberg, Germany—I spent quite a bit of time in Fort Sill because I had all my teeth pulled because my teeth were in pretty bad shape, so they gave me an Army-issued false teeth before I went to Europe. And then, I shipped out to Freiberg, Germany in 3rd Arm Division. There when I got to 3rd Armor Division, they found out I could read and write and type and guess who became the battery clerk.

KC: So, tell me about your time here in Freiberg. This is a long way from a kid born in Hope, Arkansas and raised in Burbank. What was it like to be in Germany during 1960 to 1962?

JR: It was a nice time in Europe because the dollar—you got over four marks to a dollar. Now, I think it's like one mark to a dollar, but then you got four marks to a dollar, so you had a little bit of money in your pocket and the Army took care of everything else. All your clothes, other than a few civilian clothes you could have. Back then, you couldn't have more than one set of civilian clothes in your wall locker because there just wasn't room for them. The Army of the 1960s—better than half of the Army lived in the barracks. There weren't as many married soldiers in those days. You had to get

permission to get married. So, we had more soldiers in the barracks than they do now. But it was just fun growing up there. I had a first sergeant, First Sergeant Theriac, that I actually, I guess, modeled my career after because I think he was the best leader I served under while I was in the Army and that was when I was a private. He was just a hands on leader. In fact, he lived in the barracks with the soldiers because he wasn't married at the time. You had to get a pass; you had to have a class A pass to leave the barracks and go off base. You had to wear a jacket and at least a shirt and a pair of slacks. You couldn't go off base in a t-shirt and a pair of levies in those days. We had to be back in the barracks at midnight for bed check, and if you didn't you were AWOL [Absent Without Leave]. The reason for that is we had an alert and we could have an alert at three o'clock in the morning. We had to be in our muster area, which is off the concern, and ready to deploy to the front lines in case a war broke out. So, there was a reason for us having to have those kinds of restrictions on us.

KC: Sure.

JR: Cold War days.

KC: Right. Well, I wonder if you might tell me about that a little bit. Here you are in Germany. This was basically, in one sense, the front lines of the Cold War. The prospect of the Soviets in Eastern Europe coming across—coming through western Germany. The whole fold the gap thing, and here you are working in an artillery battery. What was that like for you? What was the time like? What was your duty like? What was the environment like there?

JR: Well, we were always training. We were always ready to go to the Fulda Gap. Try to block the Germans from coming through long enough to get our civilians out of Germany because we knew that we couldn't keep them from coming through, we just knew we could slow them down. So, basically you had to protect your mind to realize that you probably wouldn't return if you got deployed to Fulda Gap. As a matter of fact, one time while I was there, we actually took all our patches off and got the tracks loaded up and we were ready to head to the fold de gap. That's how bad it got because we thought we were going to have to move out. The tension got really high. So, it was constant training. We deployed to Grafenwoehr, Germany, where we'd actually fire live

rounds and practice laying the batteries and making sure we could put rounds on the targets, so we actually practiced out there in Grafenwoehr.

KC: About how often would you have these practices?

JR: We'd go out there at least once a year. As I remember, I wasn't even in Germany for a month until we deployed to Grafenwoehr and that was quite an awakening because basic and AIT didn't really prepare for that training. I had a tough first sergeant. He wouldn't even let me sleep in the CP tent where he slept. I had to sleep out in the pup tent, and he said, "You have to earn the right to sleep in this tent with me." In other words, I had to know how to survive in a pup tent. In that cold weather, and snow and ice and stuff. You don't do that by living in a CP tent, which is a big tent.

KC: Right. While you're here, of course, one of the big issues of this stage in the Cold War was the Berlin Crisis. You've got the wall going, you've got all these issues taking place over Berlin. How did that effect what was going on there for you?

JR: Well, it just kept everybody on edge all the time and kept the leadership continuing training us soldiers that didn't really know what was going on. All we know is that we were told what to do and we did it because we wanted to survive, so we had to trust our leaders. Our unit, B battery, is a 27th Field Artillery 3rd Armored Division, was run by one of the best NCOs [Non-commissioned Officer] I've ever seen. He had all the support of his men, and we listened to what he had to say. He'd been in the Army for a while. He had mastered parachutes. He had been hurt, so that's why he was in the leg unit. You know what a leg unit is?

KC: Yes sir, but for someone who doesn't know what that is, could you explain what you mean by that.

JR: It's just a nonairborne unit. It's a unit that's not the 82nd or the 101st or one of those kinds of airborne units where most airborne soldiers go. This first sergeant couldn't jump anymore because he had hurt himself, or gotten hurt in a jump, so he was not jump qualified anymore, although he had a master parachute wings on him. He had been in Korea.

KC: Now, did he talk to you guys about what it would have been like, or what it was like, in his experiences in Korea?

JR: I don't remember. That was a long time ago and I don't remember those conversations even if they happened. I probably would say no, but I don't remember for sure.

KC: So, here you are in Germany. You know, one of the fronts of the Cold War. You're going out on maneuvers you're training from time to time. You're firing the pieces. You're really getting a good idea of what it's going to be like in that part of the world and the Cold War. Were you paying attention at all to the political aspects of it? Of what the Eisenhower administration was doing? Or what the Kennedy administration was doing? Did you pay any attention to these kinds of things?

JR: Not too much because I was too young to even understand much about politics in those days, so I didn't spend too much time. I spent all my spare time having fun, and getting into pubs, you know what I'm saying.

KC: Well, tell me about that. What did you do to have fun?

JR: Well, we went to the local establishments and drank and carried on. You know, how soldiers do. What I found, and probably remember most fondly, is the way people took care of each other. I remember when I first got to Germany I was a young guy. Hadn't drank much in my life, and so therefore drank too much and find myself waking up back in the barracks. I would say, "How'd I'd get there," and the guys would say, "We brought you back in because you had too much." That German beer is a lot stronger than American beer, so it didn't take much for guys to get too much. You don't do that more than twice before you realize you got to get it under control and I did, but the fact is that my buddies took care of me and that's what military guys do. They take care of each other when they're performing a group that's going to go into combat and probably some of them are going to die or all of them are going to die. So, you form bonds that civilians just don't get.

KC: Yeah. You talked about looking out for each other and fondly remembering this. What about the German population itself? Did you have any chance to interact with the Germans?

JR: Oh yeah. I found the German people, as I found the people around the world, very nice. The common folks like me that are in the countries, a lot of them disagree with what's going on politically with their countries. I'm sure that when Hitler was in power in

Germany that there was a lot of people that didn't agree with what he was doing, but they had no choice except to do it. The local population—I've never had problems getting along with them. And their food was just outstanding.

KC: (Laughs) That's a fact.

JR: As a matter of fact, my first wife was born in Czechoslovakia to Italian parents in 1943.

KC: Oh, is that right?

JR: Yes.

KC: And how did you meet her?

JR: I met her at a pub, and we started dating and we wound up getting married.

KC: Interesting. Now, while you're here in Germany a couple really important things take place. One, we talked about the Berlin Crisis, and of course, we've got the Bay of Pigs Invasion in April of 1961, and later on the Cuban Missile Crisis in October of 1962. Were you aware that these things were going on?

JR: Oh, when I came back to Germany—by the way, I went to Germany on the USS Geiger, the troop ship, and I came back from Germany on the USS Geiger, a troop ship. So, on the way back from Germany that's when the Cuban Missile Crisis broke out. We thought we could possibly get snuck by a submarine or something. We didn't know what was going on. All we knew was this blockade was going on down there, and here we are out in the middle of the ocean. So, we figured when we got back to the states that they'd issue us a rifle and a pack and we wouldn't get our discharged certificates and we'd all be called up because a war is breaking out. Luckily, it was settled without that having to happen and they discharged us when we got back to the states. I actually had a break in service after my first hitch—between my first and second hitch of about eleven months.

KC: Now, at this point, you mentioned that you were discharged. Had you considered the Army for a career?

JR: No, I went ahead and took my discharge and went back to California with my new wife and we started a life there. When my wife got pregnant with our son, I realized I couldn't afford to raise a son, much less hardly pay for enough food to feed our family and have the things you need to just survive. So, I started talking to my first wife, Chris,

about going back to the Army and she thought it was a good idea, so I went back into the Army. She delivered our son in Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

KC: And when did you go back to the Army full time?

JR: I was on my way to the recruiting office to join back up again the day that President Kennedy was shot.

KC: Is that right?

JR: Almost didn't go because of that, but I went on there and completed my paperwork. That was in December. Then, they let us stay out and delayed entry until January, so I went to Fort Sill, Oklahoma for my first duty station when I went back in because I had been out long enough that I had to go back through any kind of training, so they just shipped me back there in the MOS in which I was discharged before. I was a PFC [Private First Class].

KC: Okay. You mentioned the assassination of President Kennedy there in 1963 and that you were actually on your way to the recruiting station. What do you remember about that day and that incident?

JR: Well, I remembered I wanted to get back in the Army where I could help kick some ass for whoever was doing that because I thought the Russians were behind it. Of course, we all did in the military. Everybody hated the Russians in the military those days because that's what we were trained to do.

KC: Yeah. Okay, so you come back into the Army. Same MOS. You come in as a private again, I believe you said.

JR: A PFC.

KC: PFC, okay. Private first class. And you go back to Fort Sill, so you're going back into the artillery again. Did you have any—

JR: No, I wasn't in the artillery. I went back in as a clerk because when I was retired—when I separated, I had changed MOSs and I was a clerk when I got out.

KC: Oh, okay, okay. I thought you were still working with the artillery battery.

JR: I was, but my MOS got changed because I wasn't an artilleryman anymore. I was in the clerical field. I'd moved into AG Corps.

KC: Oh, okay. Very good. And you go back to Fort Sill again. And this is what? Probably, you say, January of 1964, I guess?

JR: Yeah, I guess. These dates—I should've probably had a piece of paper in front of me with all the dates written on it, but that's about when it would have been as I remember. 1963 was when President Kennedy was killed, so it would have been January of 1964. Yeah, because my son was born in 1964, so yeah.

KC: All right. Now, what are you going to be doing here at Fort Sill the second time there?

JR: Well, I was a clerk, and when I got there, I wound up spending six months there typing awards and declarations. Certificates for awards and declarations, that's what I did for six months. Got promoted to Spec-4 while I was there.

KC: And did you like this duty?

JR: Yeah, it was fine working in an office. It wasn't a hard duty at all. I could see my family every day because I could come home. We lived in an apartment—in Lawton, Oklahoma, is the name of the town outside of Fort Sill, and that's where my son was born. He was born across the parking lot in the hospital there at Fort Sill, and my working there, he was on the other side of the parking lot and that's where my son was born.

KC: That's pretty handy.

JR: In May of 1964. He's now a full colonel in the United States Army.

KC: Oh, outstanding. So, you're here for six months from January, I guess, through mid-1964. What was the next step for you? Where do you go next?

JR: I went to Orleans, France.

KC: France?

JR: Yeah. In Communications Zone Europe, it was called.

KC: Okay, and why were you chosen for this duty?

JR: Don't have a clue. It's just where I was assigned.

KC: So, you didn't put in for it. You didn't necessarily want to go to Europe again.

JR: Oh, I wanted to go to Europe again because my wife was from—her family was all in Europe, and I loved it in Germany. I loved it over there, and I've come to love being in France too. That was fun.

KC: Okay, well, tell me about your tour of duty there in Orleans.

JR: Well, Orleans, France is about fifty miles south of Paris and it's where Joan de Arc—her statue is in the center of the town. Communication Zone Europe headquarters was in Orleans, France in those days. NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] was in Paris, remember? That's before NATO was asked to leave and we were asked to leave as soldiers. United States Army was asked to leave by de Gaulle about eighteen months into my tour in France, and so we left there and went into Germany. The tour in France was nice. We spent a lot of time seeing the country. I was actually in awards and declarations again. I went into that section of AG [Adjutant General]. Typing and preparing awards and declarations for the soldiers and wound up being the NCOIC for awards and declarations when I was promoted to buck sergeant from SP5, and then they made me a buck sergeant. Then, I wound up as an NCOIC of the AG section as an E6 before I left that organization. So, I went from SP4 to E6 in a couple of years. I went from PFC to E7, I think, in like five years.

KC: It really seems that you have taken to the military life. You're doing a good job. You're receiving these pretty quick promotions. It seems like it's working really well for you here.

JR: Well, yeah. I loved it, and Chris liked it and we liked to travel. When we were in France, we'd go out on the weekends and we'd have vacations. We'd go and visit things like chateaus, and we went over to the coast where we could see where the soldiers came ashore during D-Day. Went to Point de Hawk and saw the cliffs there that the poor soldiers had to try to scale in order to attack the Germans that were defending that coast. So, we spent a lot of time seeing all this stuff. We spent time all the way down into Spain. All this in an old car that we had that we loaded up with supplies for seeing the country there and the tent, and we went tent camping and we saw the country. It was a good job. Good people to work with. It wasn't hard duty. I wasn't an infantryman, so it wasn't hard duty. It was an office job, but it's one that had to be done, so I was lucky enough to get into that field because I had a little bit of an education. And I was going to school too, trying to get some college credits. I worked on that stuff at night.

KC: And you mentioned that you spent part of this tour in Germany this time as well?

JR: Yeah. When de Gaulle asked us to leave France. You know, "Go home GIs. I don't need you in my country anymore," which is fine. I wished we had done that to Germany—I don't think we should be in Germany anymore, but that's a political thing. But anyway, we were asked to leave, so I helped move the unit out of France into Worms, Germany. So, we were stationed in Worms, Germany for the last part of our tour in Europe, which was a lot closer to Chris's home because she was from—oh my god, I can't remember where she was from. Isn't this terrible? I want to say Bad Nauheim, but it wasn't Bad Nauheim I think. That's crazy. Because I've been married a second time for thirty years, so it's hard to remember these things. But anyway, she was a lot closer to home, and so she got to see her family quite a bit. Then, we started seeing more Germany too. Again, the duty was the same. I was an AG NCO by then. I was working on making E6 and did make E6. I became NCOIC [Non-commissioned Officer In Charge] of the awards and declarations, and as NCOIC of the personnel section that I was working in.

KC: And how long was this particular stay in Germany? When did you leave?

JR: Three years.

KC: Three years. So, from 1964 through 1967, I guess?

JR: I guess something like that. I'm going to have to get these dates down better probably.

KC: No, no, that's okay. That's perfectly fine. Well, during this time, 1964 through 1967, obviously the Vietnam War heats up. It becomes the primary focus of the American side of the Cold War. A primary focus. We have soldiers going in. We've got all kinds of boots on the ground as it were. Were you aware of what was taking place in Vietnam over this period?

JR: Oh yeah. We had a lot of soldiers that shipped out of the unit, and actually shipped them all the way to Vietnam. They get reassigned from there. Stay in the states for a little while for a refresher and training maybe, and then onto Vietnam. Yeah, I was aware of the Vietnam War. I didn't know much about it because I was all the way in Europe, and as you know in those days, the only news we got was by newspaper or maybe by radio, but there was no TV in Germany at that time that was run by the armed forces networks. All the TV was in German. So, we knew about it; didn't know a whole lot about it. Heard about the protesting and stuff going on in the states and that kind of

stuff. Didn't affect me much, not at that point anyway, other than some of the soldiers were coming back. They'd come into the unit and they had been in Vietnam, so you talked to them about it and they didn't have anything good to say about it, that's for sure.

KC: Yeah. What kind of things would they tell you?

JR: Well, they'd just say, "Try not to go." But I knew sooner or later—I was making the Army a career. I was bound to wind up there. It was just inevitable if the War continued and it didn't look like it was going to stop anytime soon. Soldiers just don't talk too much about war to each other, really. Especially if you don't know them well, and I didn't know any of these guys that way. I only knew they'd come back from Vietnam because I was a personnel sergeant, so I just saw their records. And you could see their unit, you know, their patches and their medals. Their ribbons would tell you where they'd been too.

KC: Now, you're here in Europe until 1967. The fall of 1967, or so. What's the next step for you?

JR: Let's see, where did I go next? I'm trying to remember. Oh yeah, I think I went to Florida next. Yeah, I did. I went to MacDill Air Force Base on a joint assignment with the United States Army Strike Command, and I think that's called Readiness Command now.

KC: Tell me about your time here at MacDill.

JR: I was a personnel sergeant for the strike command, working on a joint assignment.

KC: So, same kinds of duties and things like that?

JR: Yeah. When I got there—well, I wasn't the head of the personnel department. I was an E6, but the E7 left, and then I wound up getting promoted E7 there and wound up as their personnel sergeant. In fact, while I was there we deployed a bunch of troops to Turkey. As I remember, we even had the airborne jump in there too on an exercise I think it was, but I can't remember that for sure. But I do know I went to Turkey because I remember sitting on a C-131 all the way over there, freezing. I was the AG for that mission because the AG didn't go, so he put me in charge. Our main job was getting soldiers in and out and making sure all the paperwork was done, especially the ones that were boots on the ground because you had to do certain kinds of paperwork and stuff as I

remember. Some of them even wanted to leave there and go—they had family in Europe, so they wanted to go on leave after they got there, so we had to do the paperwork for that and make sure they had all the necessary documents to allow for that.

KC: How long were you going to be there at MacDill?

JR: I think I was there for—I went to Vietnam from MacDill in 1970, so about two or three years.

KC: Okay, so roughly a two-and-a-half-year tour.

JR: Yeah, something like that.

KC: Yeah. And it seems like things are still going really for you here in your career. You're determined to make the Army a career. You're progressing through the ranks pretty rapidly, pretty steadily. It seems like the military life, the Army life is a good one for you. And then, you receive orders for Vietnam. Is this something that you put in for or were you chosen to go to Vietnam?

JR: No, I actually volunteered for Vietnam when I was down there in Strike Command because I knew I just had to go. I had to see it for myself, and I also had to say—you know, people look at you and say, "How come you didn't go to Vietnam?" I didn't want to have people saying that to me. I was a career solider. If I wasn't a career solider, it probably wouldn't have affected me as much, but I just knew I had to go there, I had to see what was going on for myself and I felt I owed it to my country to serve my time in Vietnam like everybody else in the military.

KC: Yeah. Now, did you prepare yourself for going to Vietnam? Did you try to find out more about what was going on? Did you talk to more people who had been there?

JR: Yeah, but I know that—I couldn't find too many people who'd been there doing what I do, which is a personnel sergeant. Most of these guys that you talk to have been combat infantrymen and those kinds of guys. The trouble with MacDill Air Force Base—there weren't too many guys there that had been in Vietnam because I was serving with Air Force guys and Navy guys and stuff like that because we were in a joint command. Some of the officers had been, but I was a senior NCO. I can't remember too many guys that I even knew at MacDill that had been in Vietnam.

KC: Are you paying attention to the television reports? Newspapers? Anything like that?

JR: You know, I quit looking at that stuff, and I still don't look at it too much because it's too bias. I have a real problem with the newspapers and the news media other than Fox News nowadays because it's just too one sided. The protesting was getting under my nerves.

KC: Tell me about that.

JR: Well, why were they blaming the soldiers? That's what we all kept asking. Why are they blaming us? We're not making these policies, we're only carrying them out, so why are they blaming us. I didn't really feel the impact of why—or any of that stuff until I came back and started being on the receiving end of all that crap. I still to this day don't understand why people took it out on the soldiers other than the fact that they were the object they could see and they knew that they were involved in it because they were wearing uniforms and stuff. We couldn't wear our uniforms when we came out of Vietnam; we had to take them off in our own country, for Christ's sakes. We sure didn't get the kind of welcome soldiers get nowadays when they come home, and I'm so glad to see that. I was glad to see that when my son came home when I was there for his return from Afghanistan. People received him in a 180 degrees different than what happened to me when I came out of Vietnam.

KC: Yeah. So, you volunteer for duty in Vietnam. Does this give your wife, your family—does it make them nervous? Are they concerned? What was their reaction to it?

JR: My wife never knew I volunteered for Vietnam. I didn't tell her because all it would have done was upset her. It wouldn't have changed anything, so why tell her? As far as she knew, the Army ordered me to Vietnam. I had nothing to do with it. And she didn't find out about it until ten years after Vietnam or something. What purpose would that have served other than to make distinction within my own ranks, and I just didn't see it necessary?

KC: Sure, sure. Okay well, tell me about your trip over to Vietnam. Where did you leave from?

JR: Well, we drove from MacDill Air Force Base to California. My wife stayed in California while I went to Vietnam. I left out of McChord Air Force Base, I think it was,

up there in the San Francisco area and flew to Vietnam on a stretch eight. I don't know how many guys fit on one of those things, but it was full, bumper to bumper.

KC: What was the atmosphere on the plane like? Were the people nervous? Were they excited? What was it like to be on that plane?

JR: It was somber. People didn't say much as I remember, and I know I didn't say much. I was just sitting there wondering if I was going to come back, and I bet you everybody on that plane was wondering that, and everybody on every plane that ever flies to a combat zone wonders that. So, no, it was a little bit different than when you come home and you're celebrating that you made it. Going to war is no fun.

KC: Now, you arrive in, what? I guess, July, I believe you've written. July of 1970, does that sound right?

JR: That's about right, yeah.

KC: Yeah. Where did you fly into?

JR: Long Bien, or Saigon.

KC: In Saigon.

JR: Yeah.

KC: Okay.

JR: Tan Son Nhut Air Force Base, I guess, it was called.

KC: Right. Right there at Tan Son Nhut. Okay, now when you land, what were your first impressions of Vietnam?

JR: "Boy, this place is hot." You step out of an air conditioned airplane into eighty-five degrees and a hundred percent humidity, and it kind of slaps you upside the head like a bulldozer. That was your first impression. And then, the smell. You could smell the rotten smell of the jungle, and the mix of diesel fuel from the airplanes. You know, the JP-4. So, yeah the first impressions were just like when I went to Panama. It's the same thing. You step off the plane and this weather just slaps you upside the head. It's like, how long is it going to take for me to get used to this?

KC: What were your impressions of Tan Son Nhut or Saigon?

JR: Well, you get to Saigon, of course, right away. That took some time before I was there. We were taken over to Long Bien where we were issued our gear. I was actually headed as a personnel sergeant to a battalion that was out in the bush, and I never

made it. The lord was with me, I always say, because when I was in Long Binh there was a major—Major Smith was up in USARV headquarters and he was going over personnel sergeants records that was coming into Vietnam and he was looking for one to do a job there with him and USARV headquarters. He came across my name and we had worked together in Europe, and he said, 'I want that man." So, I was pulled out of my supply stream. In those days, we shipped people by individuals. We didn't ship units like we do today. So, quite unusual for a solider to start off to go to some unit and never get to that unit and wind up going to another unit.

KC: Yeah.

JR: So, I was assigned to USARV headquarters at Long Bien, Vietnam. I say to today that the lord was on my shoulder that day because I'd done a good job for him in a past assignment, so he nabbed me up for that assignment because I had proved myself with him back then. I always say to everybody I've ever talked to, "Don't burn your bridges. If you're going to leave job, leave it in good faith with the person if you can because you never know when that person's life will show up in your career stream again."

KC: Yeah, especially in the Army.

JR: Well, yeah. Even in civilian life, but mainly in the Army, because the Army is not as big as it might sound. So anyway, I wound up working there at the USARV headquarters in an office instead of winding up out in a bush.

KC: Well, I'm sure this made you feel pretty good about the assignment being grabbed like you were there by this major.

JR: Well, yeah. It turned out to be a good assignment. My security wasn't as near in question, although there's no such thing as a safe place in combat zone, but it wasn't near as bad. You know, we took rockets in Long Bien. We took sniper fire. We had to pull guard duty on the bunker line, and so Charlie would come to the fence and make nasty. So, yeah, you could get hurt there, but not near like you do out in the bush or like my brothers as a gunner and crew chief on a helicopter. So, the life was a lot easier than it would have been if I had been out in the bush, for sure. And sometimes I feel bad about that, thinking that I didn't really do my part as much as I should have, but I look back on it and say, "Wasn't meant to be." I was given a job and I did the job. I just got lucky. Of

course, another thing that helped, I was a lot older. I had already been in the Army for a while and I was an E7 when I got over there. I wasn't a nineteen-year-old kid coming into Vietnam and handed a rifle and sent out into the bush.

KC: Right. I wonder if you could tell me about Long Bien. How was it organized? What were the features there like? Just describe Long Bien for me. What was the base like there?

JR: It was Quonset huts on dirt. Just long plots of dirt. I've got some pictures I can probably send you guys. I've got one photo album left. I took a bunch of pictures while I was there, but they were lost and I'll talk to you about that later, but they were lost from one of my deployments from one country to another, but I do have one photo album that's got some pictures and there's pictures of Long Bien. I'd call it a dirty pinched in compound. Almost like a jail house that we had to create in order to be safe. We had two story Quonset huts. My platoon—and I was a platoon sergeant, as well as a personnel sergeant while I was there. So, my room was at the end of one of those Quonset huts and all my platoon was on those two floors. We had to deal with the mud when it rained, and it rained in Vietnam. It was like pouring it out of a bucket, so the streets would be sloppy and muddy. Or they were dry and dusty. We were expected to show up at work in clean uniforms and polished boots. That was the day before, like today they don't polish boots anymore, which doesn't bother me a bit to see. What I tried to explain to soldiers and people don't understand, polishing boots and keeping clean uniforms has got nothing to do with that. It's got to do with discipline. And when you're trained to lay your clothes a certain way or hang them in a wall locker a certain way and clean up your room and make up your bunk and wear a clean uniform, it's not about that stuff. It's about discipline and following orders and teaching you how to do that without question because when you're in combat you don't have time to be questioning orders when they're being issued or received. So, in Long Bien it wasn't a bad life or a combat zone. I wouldn't want to live that way here. It was hot and dry and dirty. The highlights of it was getting together on a Sunday, maybe, and getting some steaks for the mess hall and firing up the grill and eating steaks and drinking beer and shooting the shit. Maybe watching a USO [United Service Organization] show. My highlight in Vietnam was the

Bob Hope show. I actually got invited to have dinner with Bob Hope across the table from him and Miss America. I got to dance with her.

KC: You've got to tell me about this in more detail. How did this come about?

JR: Well, I don't know. I wound up with an invitation. I can't remember how I go the invitation. I just know it was given to me. I was one of a number of NCOs and officers that got to go to the officers' club after the Bob Hope show and have dinner with Bob Hope and his troupe. That was quite some memories to have. I actually got to dance with Miss America, and I got an autographed photograph from her.

KC: Is that right?

JR: Yeah. That's one of the pictures I can send you, by the way.

KC: That would be great. Yeah, absolutely. Tell me about your duties. Your daily life there. Take me through a regular day for you.

JR: My regular day was getting up at about six o'clock in the morning and having some chow, then going in the office and working in the office for the day. A lot of my work was spent trying to document all the equipment over there. We had a lot of equipment and we spent a lot of time trying to take the equipment back—civilian contractors would actually steal it and repaint it and stuff, and so we would go out and I identify the equipment that was really Army equipment and take it away from them and put it back in the inventory. I spent a lot of time just doing paperwork every day for twelve hours a day. Then, I'd go back to the barracks and have some dinner. Then, get up in the next morning and do it over, and I did that for a year. Took a few rounds doing some of those missions that'd we go out and try to identify equipment and things and document and stuff. It was pretty mundane work really, but it was work that needed to be done to try to keep up with this stuff and everything. We just did office work.

KC: Mm-hmm. Now, would you yourself go out into the field and try to locate some of this stuff.

JR: Well, yeah. I went out on a few missions like that. That's the closest I came to getting hurt while I was there was on one of those missions because we'd go out by helicopter to get to the locations. We flew in one time and the LZ [Landing Zone] turned out to be hot, and before we could get out of there we took quite a few round, and that's the closest I came to get shot out of the air or hurt. Well, one other time I was going

between Long Bien and Bearcat on one of those missions, which is another base that was nearby Long Bien there. We started to taking rounds out of the jungle through the canvas of our truck we were in, and so we put the truck in a ditch and took up defensive positions. I got thrown out of that truck and banged up pretty bad doing that. Like I said, my combat experience, the actual combat, was very limited while I was in Vietnam and I'm thankful for that to tell you the truth.

KC: So, typical day, breakfast, going to work at the office. Like you said, coming back after a twelve-hour day. What sort of things do you do when you're off duty?

JR: Drank too much, for one thing, when I first got over there like most soldiers do. Making sure the soldiers were taken care of that were in my platoon. We checked gear and stuff like that because you never know when you actually have to deploy out into the jungle. You didn't know, so you had to make sure your gear was taken care of. You didn't have any weapons. Unfortunately, they kept all the weapons in the arms room. I never did understand that one. I'm glad to see they don't do that stuff anymore either. I guess they were afraid that these guys would shoot each other in the barracks, I don't know. But all the rest of the gear, we had, so we made sure that gear was maintained. Sometimes take our chairs and sprang up a movie by putting up a sheet or something and showing a movie on it out on, I guess, the building because you didn't have a big enough room inside to do it. So, you'd hang up a sheet on the side of the Quonset hut, get out a projector, and show a movie that they'd sent in. And reading. Read a lot of novels while I was there. Just trying to make the time pass. And writing letters home. My wife and I got into the habit—we bought these fifteen-minute cassette tapes, and I started doing that because it was easier than writing. She said, "Just breathe into it if you can't think of something to say, and send it to me, so I know you're alive." So, we kept those things going for the whole time I was in Vietnam and rotate. Unfortunately, sometimes she'd get all hers—she'd get like a week's worth all together and she'd have to line them up and listen to them in order because they wouldn't necessarily come at the same time.

KC: Mm-hmm. Now, being there in Long Bien. Not just working personnel, tracking down the equipment that would sometimes go messing up for you; you're also a platoon sergeant and you're in charge of these men who are working for you. Were there

any particular challenges or issues that you faced being in charge of these men back in Long Bien.

JR: Well, drugs. Making sure the drugs stayed out of the barracks.

KC: Was that a problem there?

JR: Oh yeah. It was a challenge in most all the platoons and soldiers all over Vietnam.

KC: Talk about that more. I would like to hear your perspective on this.

JR: Well, it was too easy. Alcohol and drugs was a real problem in Vietnam. It was so easy to get this stuff that it just ran rampant. You use the excuse, you never know whenever you're going to get shot or you're going to die, so why don't I just have a good time. But that's a bad attitude because then you're not capable of defending yourself even if you did wind up—say Charlies started coming through the fence there in Long Bien. I mean, it happened during the Tet, so it don't mean it couldn't happen again. So, you want to keep that stuff out of your barracks. You don't want soldiers high on weed whenever maybe they need to be woke up and put on the bunker line to defend a bunker line. How can they hit an enemy if they can't see them? So, you spend time just counseling your soldiers and being with them and being there for them. We had to maintain that bunker line, so we'd have to deploy soldiers out on the bunker line and make sure they didn't get bit by the goddamn snakes or something too. Keep the bunkers cleaned out and keep the bunker line clean. You had to always cut the jungle back or clean the jungle back or sometimes burn it back. So, you had a bunker line you had to deal with.

KC: Now, were there any instances of you catching some of your soldiers with drugs or alcohol when they shouldn't have had it?

JR: Yeah. We all drank too much in Vietnam. I drank too much when I was in Vietnam. I finally got a handle on it, like I said, after a while. When I first got over there I was putting down too much, so I finally got a handle on it and quit doing it. There was always a problem with drinking too much because it was authorized to drink, so as long as you weren't on duty you could drink. How can you tell somebody they can't—it's like telling them not to smoke. Drinking in the military in the 1960s was something people did. They just did it. I can remember in Germany going to my commander's home for dinner, and when he walked in the door he gave me a drink and I was expected to drink it

whether I liked it or not because that's just what you did. They don't do that anymore, thank the lord, my son tells me. They don't force alcohol on each other. So, alcohol ran rampant. Drugs, yeah, they were there, but you could control that. If you really got to know your men and work with them, you could keep most of them away from the drugs. I'm sure, that there was some going on that I didn't see or didn't know about, but you could work with them. Drugs was a problem the whole time I was in the military no matter what country I was in, so I had to be on top of that all the time, and you do that by being close to your soldiers and knowing who they are. Knowing their families, and knowing their kids, letting them know that you really give a shit about them.

KC: Were there any instances of catching your soldiers with drugs?

JR: No, not that I remember. I know it happened in the unit. Some soldiers were even prosecuted. I remember one solider—when we got ready to come home and he was trying to smuggle some on the goddamn airplane. Idiot. The dogs found it because they sniffed it. They run the sniffers right down through everybody before they got on the plane, and he knew that. I don't know why the stupid idiot tried it. He wound up almost losing a chunk out of his leg. He had it in his pocket or had residue in his pocket. That's all it takes; those dogs don't miss much.

KC: Right. In addition to drugs and alcohol, another issue that often comes up, especially in the rear areas when discussing Vietnam, is the issue of race. Did you see any racial problems or racial issues come up while you were there?

JR: No, not too much. People run in packs; they always run in packs. The real issues of race—I saw more race issues in Germany than I saw in Vietnam.

KC: Is that right?

JR: People were trying to survive in Vietnam, so they worked together. I was in Germany—I think it was Germany or France. No, it was Germany. During the time when they burnt down one of the NCO clubs or something over there. The blacks—they said it was the black anyway, I don't know. That was back when the blacks wanted to wear afro haircuts, you remember? I don't know how old you are. So, I saw more of that in Europe than I saw in Vietnam. In Vietnam, guys were too concerned with surviving than they were with what color your skin was. If you proved yourself to be a good solider, they didn't give a shit what color your skin was.

KC: Mm-hmm. I wonder if you might talk about some other aspects of your life there in Long Bien, for example, R&R [Rest and Recuperation]. Was that available to you?

JR: Yeah, I went to Hawaii. Spent R&R with my wife in Hawaii and our son stayed in California with family while I went to meet my wife in Hawaii, and we spent a lovely weekend in Hawaii. We actually had a cabin over on, I think, it was an Air Force base on the north shore. They have small cabins that are right on the beach, and it was a nice time and we toured around Hawaii. I was in Vietnam for about—one of the things I do remember, of course, is I was in Vietnam for about a month or two and my brother was with me, by the way, when I was in Vietnam for a while. He went over there with me, but he didn't go back. We came back to the United States on our own emergency leave to attend our father's funeral. Our father died about—I think it was about two months after we were in Vietnam, and we both came back to the states and attended his funeral, and on our way back Chuck decided he didn't want to go back. I said, "Well, you don't have to, so don't go. I don't expect you to go back and hold my hand. So, if you don't want to go back, then don't go," because the policy in Vietnam, of course, and you probably know this, brothers didn't have to serve over there together if one of them didn't want to go.

KC: And so, he stayed behind?

JR: He stayed behind. He didn't go back the second time when we went back over there.

KC: I see. And was it hard for you to go back after coming back home?

JR: Well, yeah. It was hard to go back. It was hard to leave your family a second time. It was hard enough the first time, but then to have to leave the second time it was even worse. But I did and got through it.

KC: Tell me about the morale of your unit there. What was the morale like in Long Bien in general?

JR: Well, I think it's pretty good in Long Bien because like I said for Vietnam it was a pretty good duty. For the soldiers in the bush is where the duty was lousy. That's where the crap was. Us rear echelon dorks, we had it made compared to those guys, so the morale wasn't that bad. Can morale be good when you're in a combat zone? I don't

think so. No matter where that combat zone is. If it's in Kabul, Afghanistan or if it's Long Bien, Vietnam. All you want to do is to be home and be home safe. So, that's the ultimate thing in your mind. You know, the thing that worried more than getting shot in Vietnam was being captured. That was my biggest fear being a combat zone was being captured. Not being shot, not being hurt, not being wounded, being captured. That worried me more than anything else, and I was in Long Bien. I can only imagine what it must be like in the Bush.

KC: Yeah. And why do you think that was?

JR: I'd heard what you go through at the hands of the Viet Cong. I didn't want to have to go through that. I didn't know how well I'd hold up either. I can only imagine how it would effect somebody like me that wore glasses and had false teeth. I can only imagine how long it'd be before I wouldn't have those teeth anymore and my glasses would be gone. So then, I couldn't read, if I could get anything to read after being tortured. Then, I probably couldn't eat because I wouldn't have any teeth to eat with. I'm sure that during one of sessions I wound up losing, everything would get broken. So, yeah. I talked to a lot of soldiers, and I wasn't the only one with that fear.

KC: I'm sure. Now, you mentioned being in the rear and not being a combat soldier like a lot of these other guys were. Did you have any sort of relationship with the combat soldiers? Did you run into them from time to time, and if so, what was that like?

JR: I remember one time the special forces came out of the bush. I think they must have been out there forever because they've got this look in their eye that tells me, "You don't want to mess with me." You don't talk to them about what they did. They don't want to talk about that. All they want to do is get drunk and unwind after being out in the bush. Whether they're special forces or combat infantrymen or they're artillerymen or whatever they are. If they're out in that bush and they're serving that and being involved in killing people and stuff, whether they do it directly or indirectly, that's not something you come back wanting to talk about. So, I didn't find too much conversation about that going on, especially with us rear echelon pukes. These guys came in one time and they destroyed the NCO club. I remember talking to an engineer who was there and he was getting ready to put his platoon together to rebuild the club and he says, "Seems to happen every time they come in, but it's their due. It's okay. We'll rebuild it for them.

We don't care. That's the least we can do for them." To think of what they go through; I just don't know if I could go through that or not. To be one of those guys that go through that kind of training and put up with that kind of punishment and still survive and walk around, I have the ultimate respect for those kinds of men and women, and there's women that do that now too. But mostly in those days it was all men, but just to think about what they go through, I have such respect for those guys that can get punished and survive it and go home with their lives. Whatever that life is. To even be able to go on at all is amazing to me.

KC: You talked about the soldiers you faced on a regular basis, as well as the combat soldiers. I wonder about the Vietnamese themselves. Did you have any interaction with the Vietnamese on the base there in Long Bien?

JR: The only one I remember I much about was my hooch maid, I called her. She was a woman that came in and cleaned our clothes and shined our boots and cleaned up our hooches for us. They were throughout Long Bien, and that's how they made a little extra money, so we paid them quite well actually. We could have done it, but we could pass on a little bit of revenue to the local people and that's what we did. Of course, not knowing all the time that they were sympathizers with the Viet Cong or not. I'm sure some of them probably were, and that's how they knew what targets to target when they tried to send in their rockets to do damage. Anyway, my main interaction was with the hooch maid. She was a nice old lady.

KC: Do you remember her name?

JR: No, I don't. I'm not sure I knew her name.

KC: Yeah.

JR: If I did, I probably couldn't pronounce it. My biggest problem was names. I'm a computer guy and I know numbers, I remember numbers. That's why I can kind of remember these dates because they're so far back, but names, I have a hell of a time with names. I've always been that way.

KC: Well, Mr. Rollins, I think we're probably at a good point to stop for today.

JR: Okay.

KC: This is Kelly Crager continuing an Oral History Interview with Command Sergeant Major James H. Rollins. Today is 20 November 2014. I'm in Lubbock, Texas, on the campus of Texas Tech University, and Mr. Rollins is joining me by telephone again from Massachusetts. Mr. Rollins, when we left off last time, we had you there at Long Bien working in the office there at the base. One of the things that I wanted to ask you that we didn't get to talk about yesterday was your view of the Vietnamese. The Vietnamese military that you encountered or saw or heard about. What was your opinion of the ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] as a fighting force there?

JR: Well, you know, like I said, I spent most of my day working in an office. I didn't have a whole lot of interactions with them other than some officers that would be there at USARV headquarters. I saw them as a force that was trying to maintain their country. My opinion, I think, was born more after I left Vietnam probably more than I was there. I think that these soldiers and officers of the Vietnam force were trying to maintain control of a country that they really felt was a losing battle because of the overwhelming strength of their enemy and determination of their enemy. But it didn't deter them from trying to maintain a positive attitude, I guess, and win their battle against the insurgency from the north. I didn't really have a—like I said, I didn't work with them that close. I talked to them now and then because they'd be around. Most of the officers to care of all that kind of stuff. They were the ones that were dealing with them more so than the NCOs working there at the headquarters were.

KC: Sure, sure. Well, let me ask you about the other side of it. What was your opinion of the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong that the Americans and the ARVN were fighting?

JR: A very determined group of people. I saw that force kind of like I would see our own country if somebody was trying to invade my country. I think it would be very hard to do that in this country. You know, I read something one time that the Japanese didn't invade this country because they said it would be impossible to conquer this country it had a gun behind every blade of grass. In the case of the North Vietnamese regulars as well as the insurgents there, they were determined to get their way as well and

run us out of their country. They had run the French out before us, remember? And I often wondered why we thought we could do a better job than the French did. Maybe it's because we had a newer, more moderate force to work with and maybe better technology, as well as better trained soldiers. I mean, we're going through similar stuff in Afghanistan and Iraq and the countries right now across the globe, dealing with people that are determined to run us out. In the case of Afghanistan, you know what happened to the Russians there. So, it's really tough unless you can win the complete and loyal support of the local populace, and I don't think that ever happened in Vietnam.

KC: Well, while we're on the topic, what was your opinion, while you were there, of the way the United States was fighting the war? How the U.S. was prosecuting this conflict? Both with the South Vietnamese forces; the relations there, as well as the Americans were approaching it. Again, you're there at a time of gradual winding down to some degree. The Vietnamization of the War as it was called. But what was your opinion of the way the War was being fought?

JR: It's like my opinion right now on the way the War is being fought in Afghanistan and over that way. It's being fought from the White House, and you can't fight a war that way. You can't micromanage the military on the ground. I think if they had left Wes Mooreland alone, he could have really kicked some ass over there and we would have won that war, but you can't do it with your hands tied behind your back. Kind of like what's going on now. Soldiers can't even shoot before they're shot at. So, it's getting a lot of our troops killed because of these policies put down by the White House. So, yeah, it was a tough war to fight when you're being micromanaged from the White House.

KC: So, political considerations, in your opinion, were a big part of the way the War was being fought and not in a positive way, I guess is what you're saying.

JR: We won the battles we fought over there. The trouble is the War was lost on the ground in the United States because we didn't accomplish—especially in Vietnam because we didn't even have the people on our side. The American people were against the War in Vietnam. So, we didn't even have people on our side. So, it kind of hurt the morale of the solider to think the people in the United States weren't behind us for what we were doing there.

KC: Were you aware of what was going on in the states? The continuing protests? The problems in congress when it came to supplying support for the war?

JR: Yeah, I heard about it from my wife writing me about it and sending me newspaper articles. Then, the communication we'd get in Vietnam from the news agencies. You're always hearing about what was going on in the states, and the protests, and the guys running off to Canada to get away from the draft and stuff. So, yeah, we sure heard about it. We're over there fighting and dying, and people in the United States want us to leave. They said, "What are you doing there?" And we're saying, "We're here because we were told to come here."

KC: Are there any other episodes or events or things that you would like to discuss about your time in Long Bien before we start to bring you home?

JR: Well, I just remember it as long boring days and nights. Like I said, I didn't see combat like a lot of my brothers did there. Sometimes I have regrets about that issue. I went there and I did my time, and I served my country, and I did the job given to me by the military, but on the hand, I think, "Did I do enough?" But that is what that is, and I have to live with that myself. So, it was just a long time. It took a long time to put any fear that way. There was a lot of things going on as a country and I'm wondering, "Is this really all worth it?" You know, I'm doing this job and we're going to leave all this crap here when we leave. Why am I bothering? So, yeah, you had some doubts about some of that stuff while you were there, and all you want to do is get the hell out with your head on your shoulders.

KC: Sure. Well, tell me about the process by which you came home. Are you aware of your final days in Vietnam? Do you have a short timer's calendar as it was? Are you keeping track of the days knowing how close you're getting?

JR: I tried not to do that because too many short timers got killed. That seemed to be a thing that soldiers in Vietnam thought -- Like a black cloud hanging over their head or something that they started doing that, so you tried not to do that. Although it's in your head, you don't—I never hung a calendar on the wall and marked off the days. All I did was look forward to the day that I'd ship out and get on the freedom bird and go home, and hopefully the freedom bird got off the end of the runway in Tan Son Nhut.

KC: Right. When were you informed? When did you get your orders to come home?

JR: I kind of knew when I was going to come. I had befriended an officer that was stationed in Hawaii. A full colonel because he'd come over there and I'd take care of his transportation and I was assigned to kind of take care of him while he was in Vietnam on temporary duty from the United States Army Pacific Headquarters out of Hawaii. When I got close to the end of my assignment over there, he contacts me via telex. You know, the way we did it in those days. We didn't use computers. He wanted to know if I wanted an assignment in Hawaii, and I said, "Well, yeah. That would be a nice reward after serving my time in Vietnam." And he let me know that he would put the gears in motion to get me assigned to the United States Army Pacific Headquarters in Hawaii, and that in fact took place. So, I knew basically where I was going to go about a month or two before I actually got my orders.

KC: So, are you getting excited as you know that your time is coming shorter there?

JR: Well, yeah. Getting excited and hoping that we can get out of their with our skin. Everybody that's leaving at that particular time gets out, and you don't wind up standing in line to get on the bird and have some rocket drop on you or something. Yeah, you get excited about it. It got excited at the end of every tour and heading to the next one, but especially leaving Vietnam because at least I was getting out of harm's way and, of course, my family was getting all excited about it.

KC: Right. Yeah, I bet they were. Well, tell me about the process of leaving Vietnam. What do you have to go through to get out of country there at Tan Son Nhut?

JR: Well, you had to—of course, make damn sure that your gear had no ramifications of drugs or any of that kind of stuff in it because they run the drugs through and make sure that nobody's trying to transport drugs out of country. But basically, just packing up your little duffle bag and showing up at the airport and waiting to get on the airplane and come home. It wasn't a big deal to it actually. Turning over your platoon to the next guy, whoever was going to take your place, was kind of a ceremony that you did in the barracks, but that was kind of a one on one thing. If you didn't platoon sergeant in, you'd just take the senior guy in your platoon and turn it over to him.

KC: What happened in your case? Did you have the replacement there?

JR: No. Another guy just took over for me when I left. He got to move out of the open bay barracks and move into my plywood room that was built while I was there. I kind of constructed a private room for the platoon sergeant. The best you can in those circumstances. When it turns into monsoon season, the barracks fills up with water and everything. Everything is built above the floor because there'd just be so much water around whenever it rained.

KC: Yeah, I bet. Okay, now you're on the plane. The doors close. Pick up the story there.

JR: Hold on, I'm home. Can we turn off your tape machine for a minute?

KC: Yeah, hold on just a second.

(Recording cuts)

KC: Okay, Mr. Rollins, we're just about ready to get you on this flight, or we have you on the flight. And again, like I asked before, you're on board. You've got your seat. The doors close. Pick up the story there; tell me about this flight home.

JR: Well, you know, I've been giving this some thought to try to remember these things because what are we? Forty-three years ago, when all this happened. Well, there was a lot of celebrating going on. A lot of guys wanted to drink and carry on. I don't remember doing that. I remember being very somber. Being very relieved that I had made it. Got in country and out of country three times, as a matter of a fact. As you remember, the first time being for my father's funeral, the second time being R&R, and then this time, the final time going home for good and not having to come back again. So, I think relief. I think, elation. I think, looking forward to my next assignment. You know, I stayed in the military, and I think it was the best thing that happened to me after Vietnam because I didn't have to come back to the United States and deal with the crap that was going on there I remember. I came back to Hawaii, but I was still with the military, so I was surrounded by people I trusted, I worked with, and I didn't have to deal with the civilian populations that much. So basically, I went from Long Bien to Honolulu, Hawaii. I got off the plane there and didn't have to go back to the states—I mean, back to the continent.

KC: So, you're taking up your new duty there immediately upon leaving Vietnam then?

JR: Yeah. I probably took some time off. I met my family in Hawaii. My wife and son were at the airport when I got there.

KC: Okay.

JR: And then, we moved into government quarters at Fort Shafter, Hawaii. I don't remember taking much time off, but I probably took a week off or something I'm sure. I couldn't imagine coming out of Vietnam and going straight to work, so I must have taken off some time. And of course, I had to get moved in. My wife had shipped all our stuff over there, so we had to get settled into quarters a little bit too. Then, I went to work at the United States Army Pacific in Fort Shafter, Hawaii.

KC: Tell me about this station here. What were you going to be doing there in Hawaii?

JR: I didn't know for sure what I was going to be doing until I got there and they told me really what I was going to do which was, all the units in the south pacific have what's called TO&Es [Table of Organization and Equipment] and TDAs [Tables of Distribution and Allowances] which is the documentation that listed all their authorized equipment and personnel. That documentation had to be digitized, so my job was to take all those documents and transfer them from paper to a computer. An IBM-3650, which filled up a room. A huge room.

KC: A lot different from what we have today, for sure.

JR: Oh yeah, and we had to do it the hard way. It had to be hand coded. Each one of those onto another document. And then, I had a team, of mostly women, that key punched cards with this information and then those cards were fed into a computer for six to eight hours a night. And every time it burped, didn't work in other words, they'd called me at home. I had computer time from midnight till six in the morning, and I had to get up and go out there and try to figure out why it is that something was not working.

KC: Did this happen often?

JR: Oh yeah. All the time. Remember this was the beginning of computer business in the Army. At the same time, I was going to the University of Hawaii to learn

how to program to where I could know more about what was going on with computers because that's my first introduction computers was there at Fort Shafter.

KC: Yeah. So, you're in on the early stages of this then. Very early stages.

JR: Oh yeah. I learned how to program in Cobol and Fortran, although I never did make programming because I hated to program. But I wanted to take these classes to where I could understand how the machine worked to where when we had these problems, I could help debug them. But so, the job mainly consisted of that, and that's what I did the full time I was there. I spent my time running this section of mainly women, and I think there was like twelve of them and all they did was code this information into a computer system. Actually, onto paper, and then it was key punched, and then it was verified, and then you deck of cards, it got fed into a computer, and the data would digitize. That's how we digitized it in the 1970s. A lot different than you do it today. You scan it in, or you type it in directly, right?

KC: Right. Well, it must have been, I would think, really interesting to be in on kind of the ground floor of the computer revolution in the Army at this time. What were some of the major challenges you faced doing this?

JR: Just getting it to work. It was always breaking. If the weather was damp, the cards would swell up and they wouldn't feed into the computer right, so therefore what you got was an error, so then you had to debug these error messages. Then, you had to go back and write the code that would fix it. Put it on a card and put the card in the deck, and then reenter the deck into the system. It was just time consuming as heck.

KC: I see.

JR: Hold on a second. I'm going to turn my radio down, it's a little bit loud. I have artillery ears that ring all the time from that 3rd Armor Division tour in 1960. Both ears. So anyway, that went on from 1971 till 1974, and I spent my whole time doing that and enjoying my tour in Hawaii with my family after being in Vietnam for a year. We spent a lot of time—we spent time just hiking in the mountains in Hawaii because it was so nice to do it there because there's nothing there that can hurt you. There's no animals that bother you and there's no snakes that bother you. There's nothing there, really, that's poisonous. It's a nice place to live actually. If you don't get island fever, and after a couple of years, I started to get island fever.

KC: Is that right?

JR: Well, yeah. You have to really like island life because otherwise it costs you. You have to get on an airplane to get off the island unless you take a boat to the other island, but you really get on an airplane to go anyplace. The island's fifty miles around, so it doesn't take long to cover it all. But it's perfect weather; you can get bored with the weather. Even though I bitch a lot about the weather here, at least it changes.

KC: Yeah. Well, I wonder during your time there, this three year assignment in Hawaii, are you still tuned in to what's going on in Vietnam? Are you still paying attention? Being in the Army and being around these folks.

JR: Oh yeah. As a matter of fact, if you don't—the military brought back tons of documents that wound up in a big warehouse in Hawaii from Vietnam. I had a couple of guys I knew and their job was to dig through all this stuff and try to sort it out to decide what's kept and what was thrown out and all that kind of stuff. So, I actually still had a little bit involvement with was going on in Vietnam. The protesting and stuff, that kind of stuff didn't go on much in Hawaii as I remember it. It was still going on in the states; on the continental states, but I don't remember a whole lot of it going on in Hawaii now that I think about it.

KC: Did you keep up with the news reports? The newspapers? Television news? Anything like that?

JR: Well, yeah. It was pretty hard not to because it was all over the news. I actually got tired of some of the stuff that I saw because I just wondered how much of it was news and how much of it was hype.

KC: What kinds of things?

JR: I don't know. Just the pictures. You know, why would they always concentrate on the bad stuff? We did a lot of good in Vietnam. We had soldiers working with the local communities over there and helping the kids in their homes and stuff. So, there's good things going on as well as all the bad stuff. What'd you see is some Vietnamese general blowing some guys head off. You know, why did they concentrate on that kind of trash so much like they seem to always want to do? I guess because it's more of a splash in the news, I don't know. I just got tired of seeing it because it always seemed to be negative. They didn't report all the battles that were won and stuff like that.

Yeah, they had the head count going on all the time, that seemed to be a big deal, how many people were killed all the time. I don't know. I got very tired of the whole news angle on the war. It's like I do now with what's going on.

KC: What did you think about the U.S. pulling combat troops out of Vietnam by 1973? Did you think that was the right thing to do to end military participation at that level?

JR: I don't know of a good way to end a war that you haven't really conquered the country yet. In other words, like we did after the Second World War with the Japanese. We went in there and we won, and we conquered the country. In this kind of war—people didn't call it a war, they called it a conflict, remember? I don't know of another way to get the troops out of there without getting a bunch of them killed. If you phased them out, and wound up with just a few over there, then they'd wind up getting overrun and killed. The only way to really get out of there is basically the way we did it; to pick up everybody and go home overnight pretty much and not tell a whole bunch of people about what you're going to do until it's already done because we saw what happened whenever word got out that we were leaving. I felt really bad for the Vietnamese that had worked directly with the military because you know what must have happened to those poor people. I mean, you probably heard about it in your interviews and stuff now, but you know, to think that these people are all classified, probably, as sympathizers and they were sent off to those reeducation places and stuff. What that was like I have no clue. So, I felt bad for the Vietnamese people that had worked with us in Vietnam to try to establish a democracy in that country, and then us just to pick up and dump it back into their lap and pull out and leave them holding bag with no means of defense and knowing that they'd got overrun. And, as I understand it, they got sent off to these camps and stuff.

KC: I wonder what your opinion or what your views would be on the state of the U.S. military, in your case the Army, following the American withdrawal from Vietnam? We oftentimes hear about discipline problems. We hear about the social changes in the United States and its effects on the military. You know whether it was the length of a haircut or if it was racial issues or drug issues or whatever it might be. What was your opinion on the state of the military once Vietnam was over?

JR: I've always thought our military's a strong entity and very well disciplined. We had some problems in the military—the military is a mirror image of the country in which we're from. Any military is because we come from all walks of society especially during the draft, and a lot of the military was draft in those days, so you had people in there with a lot of education and people in there with no education. So, the military was a cross section of the population, so we had some malcontents. We had some people that wanted to run around in afros, in the case of black people. We had guys like me that wanted to grow my mustache longer than the military wanted to, and I had a few problems in my career as a result of some of that kind of distinction. It never went too far, and I conformed like I should have. We had some problems, but we worked through them and we worked through them as a team and as a unit and as a bunch of people trying to reach a common goal. I always think our military's probably—I think it's the best military in the world, of course, and has proven themselves over and over and over. Yeah, we have problems. Everybody's going to have problems when you've got that many people to gather in one location. You're always going to have a few that's going to cause you trouble, but I think that our military is great, and I'd go back to the military if I wasn't seventy years old. In fact, I volunteered for Desert Storm, but I was disabled and too old, and they didn't want me. They didn't need my particular expertise anyway; they had plenty of those guys. So, yeah, we were having trouble, but I wasn't in that kind of unit that I actually saw a lot of it directly. I heard about it up in the division, the 25th Infantry Division. I was down at the United States Army Pacific Headquarters, so I was with senior officers and NCOs, and so the group was expected to act at a certain way when you're at that grade and if you don't do that, you wind up not being that grade. So, I think that we had some growing pains—that whole 1960s, 1970, 1980s generation. We had so many changes going on in our in our culture, and those changes were brought into the military from that culture with the young people coming into the military. We had to work through it, and we've done a damn good job of it because look at our military today.

KC: Mm-hmm. Now, you served there at Fort Shafter for two and a half years, or something like that I believe. What was your next duty station?

JR: It was in Turkey.

KC: Turkey? Well, tell me about this. How did this come about?

JR: Well, I was up there in the level with the military by then that I started kind of picking my assignments, so I had volunteered for Attaché Duty, and went to Ankara, Turkey on Attaché Duty at the American embassy in Ankara, Turkey. That was my next assignment after going to Washington to go to school—to attaché school in Washington DC.

KC: What did this school consist of?

JR: It was mainly how to put together intelligence reports and do the paperwork. How can I talk about this? You have documentations and information that's gathered by the attaché. It has to be put together in certain forms, and so you have attaché specialists that do that and that's what I did. You have to learn how to develop pictures and take pictures and that kind of stuff too. I went to school there for about, I think, it was four months or something like that. Then, my family and I went onto Ankara, Turkey.

KC: Now, you chose Turkey as your next duty assignment? This is someplace that you wanted to go with your family?

JR: Well, as a matter of fact, no I didn't choose Turkey. I volunteered to go in the attaché corps, and that's assignment is what was given to me after I graduated from school. It happened to be Ankara, Turkey and someplace else, in another embassy someplace in the world.

KC: Well, tell me about your duty in Turkey. This must have been fascinating for you.

JR: Well, it was, and what made it fascinating too is the fact that during the time I was there was when the Turks and the Greeks got into it over an island off the coast of Turkey. Cypress, as a matter of fact. So, we had a lot to do to advise the ambassador there on that particular conflict and what he could then deal with the Turkish government and go back to talk to our government about what was going on there. It was an exciting time actually. And the culture—getting used to that was really interesting too for me and my family. We lived in an apartment off base, there in Ankara, with the Turkish. I mean, a Turkish gentlemen owned the building that we lived in and we lived there. It's a Muslim country, so if you want to live comfortably with people in their country you want to not violate their rules, which is not very smart, because then you become, not their enemy,

but you become somebody they don't necessarily want to associate with. So, you recognize their laws and their rules. For instance, your wife doesn't run around in a micro miniskirt or shorts on the streets of Ankara, Turkey. Even though, Turkey's westernized now, and Ankara is probably one of the most westernized cities in Turkey, you still don't do that. It's just not—you don't want to be doing that. They don't wear burkas in Turkey. Maybe out in the rural areas up by the border with some of the other countries to where you're way out in the country of Turkey they might, but not in Ankara. Most of the women—I never saw—maybe I saw a few women wearing burkas while I was in Turkey, but not like you do out in the countryside. It was a learning experience, and we got to do some traveling while we were there too, which made it a nice experience too. We got to go to Egypt and go see the Valley of Kings and Queens. Go into a great pyramid. You know, we took a vacation and went there. Back when you could travel more comfortably than you can today in those countries. And I got to know Ambassador McComber, who was the ambassador to Turkey at the time was.

KC: And did you work very closely with him? You mentioned having to brief him from time to time.

JR: Well, yeah. He'd come down to our office and our colonel would brief him, who was the attaché—the Army attaché. It was a joint command because we had officers there. We had a map on the wall, and we'd point out certain things on the map to him. My job was to make sure that map was up to date, and then make sure the documentation that we'd be providing him, that'd he'd be using to brief whoever he did when he went back to Washington was accurate as I could make them. Then of course, the colonel would approve the documents before they'd be given to the ambassador. And I got to go to a couple of embassy parties that were interesting. We went to the queen's birthday ball over in the embassy for England. So, it was an interesting assignment. Getting used to some of the stuff in the country was the hardest part I think because it was just so different than being in the states after living in Hawaii and then going there. Of course, just the climate change was kind of a shock.

KC: While you're in Turkey, North Vietnam completes efforts to reunify Vietnam. Saigon falls at the end of April of 1975, and it looks like you would have been

in Turkey during this time. Do you remember reading about or hearing about the fall of Saigon, and if so, what were your thoughts on this?

JR: Well, it wasn't unexpected. I remember reading a little bit about it. I don't remember a whole lot about it. That was such a big event, it was pretty hard to miss. I remember thinking that, "Yeah, I'm not surprised it happened." I'm not surprised that we decided that it was time to get the hell out of there just like I think we should get the hell out of Afghanistan. It comes to a point where you've got to make a decision. Either you're going to win the War or you're going to leave. Make up your mind; you can't just hand around. So, I think it wasn't unexpected when it happened. That was after the actual military had left though, and that's when the North kind of moved in and took over, is what you're talking about right?

KC: Yeah, yeah.

JR: Yeah.

KC: So, you're on attaché duty here in Turkey till about the middle of 1976 as I read the information that you've provided to me.

JR: Yeah, May of 1976 is whenever it ended in Turkey.

KC: Okay, May of 1976. What's the next step? What else did you want to do? You've got a terrific career going here in the Army. What was the next step for you?

JR: Well, I actually applied to be a warrant officer in the attaché corps and they wanted to make me a W1 and I told them no, so I left the attaché corps. I told them, "W2 or nothing," so it turned out to be nothing. So, I left the attaché corps, and went back to the military; went back to the Army. We got assigned to 194th Armor Brigade at Fort Knox, Kentucky from 1976 to 1979. While there I did a year as a first sergeant. Let's see, it would have been in company A to 75th Support Battalion, which is a company that had all the clerical people in it and stuff like that that ran the battalion's personnel center. I served as a first sergeant, and then I took over as a personnel sergeant after my duty as a first sergeant. Then, I went and worked at their—what they call their one stop processing center. Set that up to where soldiers would have just one place to enter and leave the base, so they wouldn't have to run all over the base to do their processing. And they could bring their families. We had a room where the kids could have a babysitter basically, and they wouldn't have to be keeping up with them. We had a playroom for

them. So, it was like a one stop area where they could do it. Once that was set up and everything, it was time to leave. I was there from like June 1976 until April of 1979.

KC: So, you spent quite a bit of time there. And this one stop shop, as you say, it seems to me that would have been long overdue for something like this. Just to make things more efficient and easier on everyone. What sort of difficulties did you face, challenges did you face, helping to set this up?

JR: Well, I come off first sergeant duty and so it was easy. Although, I became a strips back to master sergeant strips. I had the reputation of, "This guy was a first sergeant," my troops—the first thing I had to do was shape them up. They were kind of sloppy. I got them all together in a corner, and we all sat down. I said, "Look, your uniforms have got to get cleaned up. You've got to be wearing clean uniforms and good uniforms. Your boots have got to get shined." And I had males and females there, and a bunch of civilians too. So, we all shaped up and we reorganized the office where people could flow through it well, and we started working together. Got an office environment running that people wanted to work in. I was always pretty good at that. Every place I went I'd wind up reorganizing the place I was there. Making it flow more efficiently. They'd have people running over each other trying to move from station to station. I remember one incident that was kind of funny right after I got there, after I got into doing this one stop processing and getting that set up. It snowed. I mean, it snowed pretty heavy for Fort Knox, so we had to go out and shovel walkways and stuff. So, I had a couple females—they're pretty small girls. "We've got to shovel too?" And I said, "Everybody shovels in this unit. I don't care what your rank is or what your sex is, including me, and I'm a top ranker here. So, we all get out there and shovel. You just take a smaller shovel full that's all." So, we all go out, and we shoveled snow, and we got to walk on these cleaned off steps and salted them down. We all came back in, cleaned up a little bit, and went to work, and the troops continued to flow through the processing center. Something I wouldn't put up with was somebody giving a line troop any kind of lip. These guys and gals were working their butts off out there and a lot of them were running heavy hours doing whatever it is they do. If they're a gunner on a 105 howitzer or if they're a tanker or whatever they were, and I wouldn't take these people giving them any kind of lip. I said, "You've got any problems with any of these soldiers, you just tell me, and we'll

find out what's going on." Most of the time, it's because they're just plain tired and they're wore out, and your job is to give them service and get them through here as quickly as possible. It was a nice little organization. I remember it with fondness.

KC: What's your next step?

JR: Let's see, where did I go from Fort Knox? Oh, I went to Panama.

KC: Okay, you've got to tell me about this. How did duty in Panama come about?

JR: Well, actually I went out to California from Fort Knox and went to what was called Organizational Effectiveness School. And fitting in my career, which is a personnel man or HR manager in civilian life, right? I was an HR manager. Organizational Effectiveness School was the Army starting to try to figure out how to get people to meet and come to a synergistic idea of how to get things done, rather than argue about things I guess or something. Anyway, it was a scientific way of doing things. You had a whole set of slides and stuff, and you'd put people through training on how to get to the end—from the start of one end to get to the other end and come up with a good plan for doing something. If it's deploying a unit from one country to the other, or if it's just going to the field for a weekend, or whatever it might be, you have to plan all this stuff, so how do you do that if you've never had any real training on deployment or maybe organizing things. I went to school to do that for—don't know how long it was. Anyway, I'm thinking four months or something or five months. Then, I left there and I went back to Fort Knox for a while, and then went to Panama after that as an organizational effectiveness NCO.

KC: How did the duty in Panama come about?

JR: I actually had volunteered for this assignment as organizational effectiveness NCO and I liked going overseas, so I had volunteered to go overseas on that assignment to the 194th Infantry Brigade in Panama, came up and so I took it.

KC: Tell me about this assignment. It seems very interesting down there.

JR: Well, unfortunately about this time, I went through a divorce too. So, that's when my marriage to my first wife ended, just before I went to Panama. So, I went through some tough times trying to get that ironed out. Being overseas, and then having my ex-wife and son back in the States. It was an interesting time to try to sort all that out and work through that.

KC: It would have been very difficult, I can imagine. Do you think that your military career and all this moving had an effect on that?

JR: Well, I've always said if my wife had went with me to Panama, we'd probably still be together today and I wouldn't be married to the wife I'm married to now. She'd always travel with me every place I went and we had had some difficulties, so she didn't want to go to Panama, and so she didn't. So, we got a divorce as a result of it. I always said my family needs to go with me whenever I go every place, and I managed to take my family with me every place I went except, of course, Vietnam. All these other assignments, all over the world, my family was with me. So, they got to see quite some things in different parts of the world and everything. But the assignment in Panama was both challenging because of personal problems going on as well as the job was a completely new job to me. We had a section of myself and an E6 and a captain, and there was one other. I think he was a major. But there were like four of us in this section and we'd put together these presentations to give to the senior staff of the units around to help them train to be better organized and to hold better meetings and reach the conclusions quicker. That kind of stuff. So, I spent—I wasn't there that long. 1979 to 1981. September of 1979 to June of 1981. I came down on orders for sergeant major's academy. All the while, in Panama, I made sergeant major. I was promoted to sergeant major by the brigade commander in Panama. It was an interesting assignment because Noriega was still in charge down there, and his military were the police, and so it's dangerous. If they told you to do something, you better do it. I saw them shoot the tires out of a car that didn't stop one time with an automatic weapon, so you didn't mess around with the gendarme down there because they'd shoot first and ask questions later. Noriega was in charge with an iron fist in those days. I always looked at that canal, and said, "What are we doing here?" Because this canal is undefendable. If somebody wanted to come in here and blow it up, they would. All they have to do is fly over one plane and drop a bomb in the middle of it, and you couldn't get through it anymore. But I guess the military thought it was worth defending though, even though most of our—I don't even know if some of our ships could even get through. I saw the Queen Mary go through one time and that was interesting. It was like a foot on each side of that ship when it went through there. It just barely fit through the canal.

KC: Well, this sounds like it was another interesting stop for you in your career. Where do you go from Panama?

JR: I went to sergeant major's academy at—

KC: Fort Bliss, probably.

JR: Fort Bliss, Texas. Yeah. I was class of eighteen out of the sergeant major's academy. After the sergeant major's academy, I went to Fort Lewis, Washington to I Corps, as a G1-DPCH Sergeant Major for I-corps. Then, fortunately or unfortunately depending on how you look at it, it was a good assignment. I was up there and I was a G1-DPCH sergeant major for I Corps and my main mission was to go around and make sure all the recreation centers and all that stuff was maintained properly. An assistant G1 anyway, if you wanted. It was a good assignment. It was a good assignment for a sergeant major because then I got promoted to command sergeant major and that job went away pretty fast because it wasn't a command sergeant major position.

KC: Well, it seems like the promotion from sergeant major to command sergeant happened pretty quickly then.

JR: Yeah, it didn't take too long. To tell you the truth, I was really surprised I made command sergeant major because I was in the AG corps and there's not too many AGs that make command sergeant major. I think it's like one half of one percent of the AG NCOs makes command sergeant major back in those days. But I'd also had some pretty challenging assignments and I'd been recognized in each one of them with rewards, so I'd been successful in each assignment and so I guess the Army thought I'd make a good command sergeant major because they made me one.

KC: Right.

JR: And I felt very proud of it. It is pretty good for a dirt water farm boy from Arkansas to make command sergeant major in the Army.

KC: That's for sure, and I wonder if you might take a little bit of time to explain the role, not just the duties, but the role of a command sergeant major in the Army in the 1980s. For someone who is not aware of what this role would be, can you talk about that a little bit.

JR: Well, you're the right arm of the commander. You're the one that takes care of the NCOs and any enlisted in his command. You're responsible for them. You're

responsible for their morale, their welfare. Your job is to make sure those soldiers are well taken care of because those are the lifeblood of the unit. They're the ones that are going to fight the battles, so you want to make sure they're well trained, their discipline's up. Find out if it's not, then why? You go through a lot of avenues.

KC: Describe some of those for me.

JR: Well, one of them would be—back in those days we actually had promotions boards because you promoted locally to certain grades. I think up to like E5 as I remember. So, the commander had stripes he handed out, so he had promotion. You help people get prepared for those promotion boards. You had enlisted soldier of the month, that kind of stuff, which helped soldiers prepare themselves. And you held inspections. You went around and made sure that you didn't have drugs in your barracks. I was always moving. They never knew where I was going to show up at next. I always felt if you wanted to find me you had to come to my office first thing in the morning because after that I was out with the troops. I go out and get dirty. I could remember when I was down with the unit that I was command sergeant major for, I had a tank company and I had an infantry company and an engineer company in it because it was a testing outfit. We tested hardware for the government. I remember going inside the M60 tank and telling the commander of that tank, which was an NCO E7; I said, "I want to learn how to drive this thing and to shoot it because I want to know what it's like to be in this tank whenever it's a hundred degrees outside here in southern California." I said, "I'm just like anyone of your privates, or your spec 4's, or whoever is in this tank. I'm just like one of them, so forget the fact that I'm your command sergeant major. I want you to treat me just like you treat them." Serves a few purposes. One is, you get to know what kind of a leader he is. You're also in there with the troops and they don't see you as their superior, their command sergeant major. They see you as an equal inside that tank, and so you get to know them well too and how well they're trained and how well they handle themselves in stressful situations like moving and firing. So, I'd do that kind of stuff. That's the kind of stuff I like to do. I like to get down there where I really knew what was going on because I remember what it was like when I was a private in Germany. That's one thing I liked about First Sergeant Theriac. He got dirty with the troops. He played ball with them. We had the best football team in the battalion. He did everything with the troops.

He ate with them. After every troop got served, then he would eat, and that's the way it always was. When we're in the field, after every troop got served, then I eat. That's the way I was as a first sergeant, and that's the way I always was as an NCO. My troops came first. You had to take care of your soldiers because if you take care of your soldiers, they'll take care of you. I never lead as an NCO that used my stripes to lead with. I used my personality to lead with. I wanted soldiers to be lead the way I wanted to be lead when I was younger, and I wanted them to look up to me as a leader and not as a person wearing a bunch of stripes. So, to me, a commander sergeant major's job is taking care of his soldiers. It's just that basic.

KC: Now, you retired in, I guess, early 1985 according to the records that we have here.

JR: January of 1985.

KC: Yeah, January of 1985, so you would have had, what? Twenty-five or almost twenty-five years in the Army at this point, is that correct?

JR: Yeah, January 1985 to January 1960 with that small break in service that I had, so I had a little over twenty-four years' service active and one year in the reserves. I always just say I got twenty-five years' service because I don't even remember being out of the Army.

KC: Yeah. Well, what lead to this retirement? Could you have stayed around a little longer for another assignment or were you ready to go?

JR: I was ready to go; it was time for a change. I was starting to physically fall apart too. My back was going out on me. I lead by example, like I told you. My battalion would be running and I'd run around the battalion and go back and pick up the stragglers and encourage them to catch up with the battalion and stuff when we'd have a battalion run. I could not not lead that way and my back was going out on me, and I was told by doctors if I kept doing what I was doing I'd probably wind up hurting myself. So, if I couldn't lead by example I wasn't going to lead as an NCO in the Army. So, that was one of the things that lead to it, and I was just ready for a change after twenty-five years of being a solider. I wanted to see what I could do in civilian life.

KC: Mm-hmm. Did you know what you wanted to do in civilian life?

JR: Not really. I never really gave it a whole lot of thought. I figured I'd figure out something to do, I always have.

KC: So, you retire in January of 1985 without a clear plan in front of you. The Army had helped make your plans for twenty-five years and now you're on your own. Was that a difficult change for you?

JR: Well, not really. I'd always kind of made my own plans and did my own thing. I've been surviving ever since I was about fifteen or something, so I've been taking care of myself and then taking care of my family after I got married. I always figured where there's a will, there's a way. And now, when I retired at least I had a little bit of money to back me up. I had my retirement pay that I could use to get me through if I didn't have a job of some kind. I've always said I only had one career and that was the United States Army. I've worked a lot of jobs since the Army. That's what's nice too. If I didn't like the job I was doing I would switch jobs, and I went through a number of different jobs before I finally settled in to where I'm at. It always works out. I went to school for a while and that got boring. It was hard to sit in a college classroom with a bunch of eighteen-year old's or twenty-year old's when you're in your forties and listen to a teacher talk about garbage. I said, "What the hell am I listening to this stuff for?" So, I didn't stay there long. I got a few credits, but I moved on from that. We got out here in Massachusetts because my wife's from here. After traveling across the country in a RV. I bought an RV and so we spent a year on the road seeing the country. Then, we wound up here in Massachusetts. And while my wife was going to college to get here degree as a court stenographer, I worked around different jobs, and wound up working at the nuclear powerplant in Plymouth. So, I worked there for about six months or so until she graduated her year or whatever it was. After that, we went back to California, up by Fort Ord and Monterey. My wife went to work as a court stenographer there, and believe or not, I went to work back with the Army in the same unit I had been the command sergeant major for.

KC: Is that right?

JR: Yep. Remember when I told you to never burn your bridges?

KC: Right, right.

JR: Well, I walked in—there was a jump there as a computer security specialist. A GS—what was it? Ten or something. Nine or something, like that. Anyway, there was a job there. It was advertised to go with personnel. I went over there to look to see what jobs were available on base because I wanted to go work with the Army again. You know, Army to the Corps, right? So, I went in and filled out all the paperwork and I was given an interview. Well, I get over there and the guy that's interviewing is a colonel, and he had been a major when I was a command sergeant major there. I walked in to apply for the job to take the interview, and he looked up at me and he said, "Well, go to hell. Look who you are." He said, "I thought I recognized this name." And he said, "Well, you've got the job, so now let's go to lunch." So, we went to lunch and he gave me the job. It was a new field. You know, computer security. So, my job was to write security procedures for the computer system that they had, and I did. I worked there for nine years or something with that unit. Longer than I was a command sergeant major. I was actually a civilian for them, and when I left there—they closed Fort Ord and they closed that unit down that I was working for. They went to Fort Hood, and my wife and I came back out here. I was a GS12 when I was rifted, and I wound up as head of security for that unit. I went from being their computer security guy to the head of the security department. It was a fun job because we got to play around with all the new stuff because it was a testing outfit, so you got to test missiles and small weapon hardware that the Army was trying to see if they were going to buy or if they were going to invent. The laser—I forget what they called it, but you know whenever they play war games out in California on the desert out there, they use lasers to kill with. They put lasers on the rifles and then they put receivers on the body, and then they know if they get shot. So, we tested the beginning of that whole process of doing that there at Fort Hunter Liggett in California. They were fabricating them in our fabrication shop and hanging them on tanks and soldiers. It was cutting edge stuff. We had computer screens up that they'd fabricated together in our computer center that was all classified information in them days. My job as security was to secure the area to make sure nobody wandered into the area. First of all, we were playing with those lasers because they weren't safe lasers in those days. You had to wear goggles and everything whenever you used them. So, one of the jobs I had in security was to make sure the area was secure, and so we put out guard shifts and we actually

hired civilians to walk guard all the way around in the mountains and stuff on the trail and things to make sure some hunter didn't wander into our testing area. We did that, and I did that job, and then they closed the base and closed out the unit I had and I got rifted so we came back out here. From California to Massachusetts. And I worked the nuclear power business again here for a while. Again, it was in security. At night in the computer field, I was working in their access authorization which is getting background investigations done on people that are working at the nuclear powerplant to make sure they won't set a bomb or that kind of stuff. To make sure they're stable people that are working there. You know, the painters, the welders, and all the other people that come into the nuclear powerplants have to be cleared. So, I worked at the nuclear powerplant around here on the east coast doing that job until I tired of traveling and being away from home again. Because you'd go into the outage and you'd have to be there, like twelve hours a day for like all week long and stuff. You just live at a hotel outside the plant until the plant came back online again. So then, I went back to the VA, and the VA sent me to training to be a network technique. I completed my VA training to be a network technician and applied for a job with the school system I'm working at now, and it's all history after that. That was fifteen years ago.

KC: So, you've been at this position for quite a while then?

JR: Yeah, for about fifteen years. In fact, I got recognized at a ceremony a while back as being with the school system for fifteen years. And I helped build their computer network system at this school district. Before I got here, they didn't even have, I don't know, fifty or sixty computers, and now they got 1,800. A complete network that I was involved with along with my boss who was Craig Machamer. He's the IT director for the school department, and he and I work hand in hand as partners in running this whole network. I liked it because it's close to home. It's a really nice place to park your car. Like if I'd worked up in Boston doing this work, I'd have to pay to park and worry about the car getting broke into. Just a nice bunch of people to work with. It's been a nice job and I don't know how much longer I'm going to—people keep asking how long I'm going to work and I say, "I don't know." I like working. I like what I'm doing, and it's a nice place to work. People are friendly. Pretty much get along pretty good with everybody, and everybody tells me I can't retire because they don't know what they'd do

without me. I call bullshit. You know, you can always find somebody to take your job. It's been a nice place to work, so I'll probably keep working there as long as I physically can probably.

KC: Mm-hmm. Well, I've only got just a few more questions for you, Mr. Rollins. One, you spent twenty-five years in the Army, and it's not just twenty-five years, but it's twenty-five—this span covers a very diverse period of time. A lot of things change in terms of conflicts, in terms of technology, in terms of personnel, and a lot of different things. What do you see as being the biggest changes in the military, in the Army particularly, during your time there?

JR: The funny thing is I didn't see a whole lot of change in the Army during my time. There wasn't much change in uniform, or equipment, or anything. I saw it coming towards the end of my career because of where I was working, which made it easy to see, because I was working there at that testing center at Fort Ord, California. I was just command sergeant major there. I saw it coming because I could see the trend. From the time I went to basic training at Fort Ord California in 1960 until I was there in the 1980s as a command sergeant major, I didn't see a lot of physical changes in the military. I saw a lot of changes in the military because of what we went through as far as the culture. We went through the whole hippie generation change, which effected the military too. The whole burn the bra. The whole love thing went on. All that stuff went on and it reflected in the military too. The uniform didn't change. The headgear changed; headgear is always changing in the military. They're wearing berets now, but mark my word, it won't last long. It will change again. But other – as far the uniform—there wasn't a whole lot of change in the uniform. I don't think we saw a lot of change in the military's uniform and stuff until Desert Storm I don't think. When the military had to put together better stuff, they knew it. I saw the change in myself. I just wanted to be a better leader every time I went to a different unit, so each time I went to a different unit I wanted to be better than I was last time. And I saw really good NCOs. I saw some that weren't, but most of them, the vast majority of them, wanted to do what they did and they did it well. I think it's been a theme in our military since Valley Forge, and that's why we're so strong in the world because we have that theme. We have malcontents. Every big organization is going to have those, but the most of them are like my son, Colonel Rollins. They want to have

the best unit in the military, so they know the way to do that is to take care of their soldiers and not abuse them. Even if you're in Grafenwoehr, Germany in January and it's so god damn cold that by the time you get your chow in your mess kit and get over someplace to eat it, it's almost frozen to the damn thing. You still try to get them hot food out there if you can. Or if you're on the LZ in Vietnam, they try to bring hot food into those troops on that LZ by helicopter just to show them that somebody back in rear really gives a shit if at all possible. Those are the little things that good a long way when you're fighting a war.

KC: Well, only a couple more questions for you here, and one is, your time in Vietnam is unique to you. How do you think your Vietnam experience most affected you in your life?

JR: Funny thing is it wasn't the Vietnam experience; it was the way I was treated when I came home that affected me more than anything else.

KC: Talk to me about that.

JR: Well, I just was so disappointed. I wanted to lash out at these idiots. I was driving my car in San Francisco visiting somebody up there, and I had taken up my blouse, my uniform top and I laid it in the back seat. Somebody looked in my car and saw that uniform blouse laying in the backseat with my stripes on it and everything, and before I knew it there was this crowd around my car and they wanted to turn my damn car over. And I said, "What the hell did I do to you to cause you to act like this?" So, I was very disappointed in my own people for treated me as a solider this way because of a uniform I was wearing. If you want to pick on somebody, pick on the politicians that start the war, not on soldiers that have to fight these wars. That's the kind of stuff that went on for years. Nobody welcomed us home. We had to deal with this black cloud over our head for years, and years, and years before we finally stood up and said, "Enough!" And all these organizations started sprouting up, and I think it was the soldiers from the Vietnam Era that made the country realize that this is not the thing to do. Make your soldiers know that they're proud of them, and when they come home you welcome them home, and thank the lord that they're home in one piece or many pieces in some case, but at least they're home. So, that's what affected me more than the actual time in Vietnam.

Like I said, I was one of the many lucky ones that didn't have to go out in the bush and live out there for days at a time fighting an enemy you could hardly see.

KC: Mm-hmm. My last question for you, and I promise I'll stop asking questions after that.

JR: It's all right.

KC: Is about the legacy of the Vietnam War. As you look back on it from your perspective after all these years, what is the ultimate meaning of the Vietnam War? What are we going to look at? How should we look at the Vietnam War? What should it mean to us in your opinion?

JR: Well, you'd think we'd learn from our mistakes. I swear I can see the parallels between the Vietnam War and what's going on in Afghanistan and Iraq and over there in that part of the world. I can see the parallels so many times. My brother and I talk about it too. It's just why can't we learn? You know, are you a Star Trek fan?

KC: No, I'm not.

JR: Well, Star Trek's got a prime objective, I think they call it, that says you can observe a country or a world when you're circling around it, but you can't interfere. No matter what, you can not interfere. They can kill each other. You can't interfere. Sometimes, I think the United States should start thinking about living their lives that way, and quit interfering in these people's lives. I ask myself, what gives us the right to go to Vietnam or Afghanistan or any place else and tell these people how to live. I know that we think that it's not right that we had a dictator over there that was killing people off and everything, so why didn't the people there do something about it. Why do we always have to be the ones to do something about it? Why can't we handle it diplomatically rather than sending troops? We've got this problem going on with ISIS now. Why are they after us? They're after all westerners. We just keep doing this over and over and over, and we get thousands of our soldiers killed and the end result is we're right back where we started from. We went into Vietnam and we came out of Vietnam, and as far as I'm concerned, all we accomplished was getting a bunch of people killed. I think the French learnt the same lesson. I don't know. I don't know what the answer is. I'm not that smart. If I was, I would have tried to do something about it, I guess, but I just don't know what the answers are. I have a problem with some of the things that go on in

some of these countries and the way they treat their people, but we were a people in similar circumstances here in the United States for a while. We're at each other's throats and we finally worked things out. Why is it if we can do it, other countries can't do it? Especially, some of these countries that have been around a hell of a lot longer than 300 years. What makes us think we're so smart that we can tell them—not to tell them what to do, but to lead them? To advise them in a better way to live than the way they're living. They've been choosing to live that way for the last 2,000 years. I don't know. I don't know what the answer is. I just know that it seems—it's sad to think that we went to Vietnam, and we left Vietnam, and we left that country no better off than it was when we got there.

KC: Well, Mr. Rollins, is there anything else that you would like to add before we close out the interview?

JR: No, I don't think so. I've enjoyed talking to you. I wish I could've provided better answers actually.

KC: Oh, no, no, no. This is a terrific interview.

JR: It was a long road from Hope, Arkansas to Acushnet, Massachusetts. I never thought I'd travel the world like I did, but I'm glad I did.

KC: Sure.

JR: It's tough on a solider, though, whenever we have to start building a life and I'm still paying on a house when I'm seventy-two years old because I had to start so late paying on it. But I wouldn't do anything different. I would still do what I did, and like I said, I'd go in the Army again. I live the Army now through my son. In fact, he's just about ready to retire himself. He's been in the Army at least twenty, if not more, himself.

KC: That's terrific.

JR: I just think it's a long hard road for a country boy from Arkansas.

KC: Yes, sir.

JR: High school dropout when I went in the Army, and I left the Army with a two-year college degree anyway, and as a command sergeant major. Not too bad a beat, I guess.

KC: It's certainly a career you can be very proud of, I think.