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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Kenneth Charles Risley
Conducted by Dr. Philp F Napoli
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Transcribed by Mark Steven Varela**

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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.

1 (Editor's note: Audio cuts in here)

2 Philip Napoli: How old were you?

3 Kenneth Risley: Eighteen.

4 PN: Just a year later.

5 KR: Yeah.

6 PN: Okay. Tell me a little bit about training.

7 KR: Well I was 2nd of 38th Infantry, at Kelly Hill in Georgia, 1964. We became
8 the 11th Air Assault test. We trained to two years, the platoon I was in, I was in a mortar
9 platoon. I think it was July that we became the 1st Air Cavalry Division, they transferred
10 the colors. I believe there was—I remember Johnson coming on TV, it was in the day
11 room, we were all packed in there and he said, "Today I'm sending our Airmobile
12 Division to Vietnam." I believe it was in September that we went over there.

13 PN: How'd you go? Did you remember the trip there?

14 KR: I remember the ship we were on. It was the USS *Buckner*; I remember going
15 through the Panama Canal and I thought that was the most beautiful place I'd ever seen. I
16 mean it was just beautiful, you could see the old shipwrecks down in the water, it was so
17 clear and the Mexican-style buildings, the white buildings with red tile roofs and the
18 jungles. There's a big lake in the middle, I remember. We went through the locks. We

1 landed in a place called Qui Nhon. From Qui Nhon we flew to An Khe. That was our
2 home, and it was nothing but jungle at the time. I talked to some guys recently and they
3 said, "I was at An Khe, man!" They talked about how bad the water was and how bad the
4 barracks was. I said, "What? You mean you guys had barracks? We had nothing, we slept
5 on the ground, you know." We never had permeant barracks. "Pup" tents at first and then
6 homemade stuff. Towards the end, we had the large unit tents, you know. But that's all
7 we ever had there. Then, outside toilets, outside—I personally went to a little creek,
8 down below our outfit and took baths in it. I remember I was coming back from that
9 creek one day and I was playing with a snake, I had stick and I was playing with a snake.
10 This guy comes by and he says, "Are you out of your mind?" I said, "What are you
11 talking about?" He said, "Don't you know what that is?" "Yeah, a garter snake." He said,
12 "No, that's a bamboo viper. That thing bites you, you'll be dead before you take two,
13 three steps." I got shaky then. I left snakes alone after that because Kansas, there's garter
14 snakes and if you go out in western Kansas, you'll get rattlers or something. I didn't
15 know a little snake like that could be so deadly.

16 PN: Tell me a little bit about those first few months, you guys went into An Khe
17 in September.

18 KR: The first few months. I remember a patrol going out and we were at base
19 camp, mainly building defenses and we had—Vietnamese would go out in groups and
20 clear brush and we would supervise them. We cleaned our own areas too. I remember
21 with the guys out on patrol, we got shot to the neck. That was probably the first time, you
22 know, the incident of combat came into view. I think it was—our first trip was to a place
23 called Happy Valley. That was in October because my squad leader, back in the States,
24 he was killed October 10th and he was the first causality that I knew. He was my squad
25 leader for two years back at Benning. He went out—I believe it was out as a forward
26 observer with B Company, 2nd of the 5th and he was killed October 10th and that was the
27 first casualty that hit home to me. Happy Valley was our first time out and first real
28 combat was at X-Ray. I remember we were at Catecka, it was a tea plantation.

29 PN: Yes, sir.

30 KR: From there, I remember us being at a place called Falcon. I remember
31 bandages, bloody bandages and something about a hospital there and bunkers. There was

1 a lot of fighting there I think but we went in later and we were supporting the line
2 companies with mortar fire. It was towards evening, they wanted us to—they didn't say
3 where we were going, we just had to be at a certain location. I now know it was Victor,
4 LZ (Landing Zone) Victor. We flew into there and it was just about evening and it was
5 just getting dark. They told us that we were going to go in and get a lost platoon the next
6 morning. I really didn't know what they were talking about at the time. Then we had this
7 guy named Arpan, he was a lieutenant RTO (Radio Telephone Operator). He kept us
8 informed on what was going on. I remembered the night of the 14th, listening to the
9 artillery crash because X-Ray was where we were headed at the next morning. We were
10 going to march in the next morning—the line companies were going to march down over
11 to X-Ray. I could hear the artillery crashing at X-Ray that night, I think it was three or
12 four miles off or something like that. The next morning, we were saddled up and ready to
13 go out with the battalion, Colonel Tully was a battalion commander. We were just getting
14 ready to go out and our platoon leader was called to a meeting. This is one of the things I
15 would really like to know. Who called him to that meeting? When he came back, we
16 were already saddled up and ready to go, the had some helicopters sitting there at Victor,
17 they got up and then they sat back down, and they told us, "Get on those helicopters and
18 go." Me—Colonel Tully and the 5th Cav had just started out for LZ X-Ray over land. We
19 got on those helicopters and Pam came up to me and said, "We're going in the ship" I
20 said, "What are you talking about?" He said "Well, we're going in to replace the lost
21 mortar platoon from the 7th and 10th." I said, "Oh, damn." We got on those helicopters
22 and boy we went. It was about the same time our battalion was headed out on the ground.
23 I remember seeing that thing for the first time, it was just white clouds of smoke in a
24 circle. Thick and heavy hanging over. We came in, the mountain was on our left. I was
25 the number three mortar gunner. I'd just made sergeant, October the 11th. Right after my
26 birthday, my twentieth birthday was October. I was about a month into my twentieth
27 birthday. I knew the directions; I had a compass. It was my job. We came in from the
28 southeast—first, this is something else that puzzles me. We came in from the north and
29 kind of did a half moon, the helicopter, and landed at the southeast. I don't know what
30 that's about, I still don't to this day. But it was heavy smoke, and we just bailed off the
31 helicopters, I mean they didn't even land, we just jumped off. If you ever tried to—I was

1 carrying a forty-pound bipod plus my weapons and ammunition and field telephone. I
2 mean I was carrying a lot of equipment and it was really difficult doing this. I didn't think
3 much about it when I got off because helicopters, they make so much damn noise. I could
4 see people moving around. We headed diagonally to our right. We came in on the
5 southeast, the mountain was on our left and we headed diagonally to our right. About that
6 time, Arpan came from the right and he was an agents RTO and they were motioning us
7 where to go and we went by this anthill and the soldiers were laying around there and I
8 thought they were asleep. I didn't really know that we were in some deep trouble at that
9 point. Then we get forward enough away from the helicopters, I can hear the small alarm
10 far, the planes all—there was so much stuff going on there, I could hear it. Because when
11 you're next to a helicopter, you can't hear anything. My god I thought, "Oh lord, I'm in
12 trouble! Those guys are all dead." That's something else I want to bring up here. Some of
13 those men were shot in the forehead, I mean directly straight in the forehead. The North
14 Vietnamese were just starting to pull—when we got there, they were just withdrawing on
15 the morning of the 15th. They were pulling back. I think, I really believe there were in
16 there long enough to give those guys what we called a "coup de grâce" or whatever it is,
17 because we went in—we were on a finger. We came in from southeast and it was
18 elephant grass and there was a wooded finger coming diagonally. It went north and south.
19 Not completely north, because I took compass readings there. It didn't go—it wasn't
20 perfect north and south, but it was close. It was a little peninsula coming out and it was
21 trees. The very tip of it, there is where we started running into the dead. It was an anthill
22 there and some of the guys were up against those anthills. I remember one guy, we passed
23 by them. One was behind a tree and he scraped it out, you can see where he scraped it out
24 with his fingers in a prone position and he was laying behind a tree. He had a M79 and he
25 was dead, it was an American. Not far from him, it was North Vietnamese facing him and
26 he was dead in a prone position. You could see where the M79 rounds hit that tree and
27 they didn't—they got to make so many revolutions before they arm themselves, and they
28 were stuck all in that tree. They were shooting at each other. It was all a mess and then
29 the dead—we set our mortars up amongst the dead. I mean, it was just unbelievably how
30 many dead there were. We started digging our mortar pits, I remember that, and we
31 had— meanwhile all this other stuff was going on. The shooting, the bombing, the

1 whatever. It's just crazy, we had our own perimeter. It's one of the things that the platoon
2 leader had, he was believer in digging in, and thank god he was. We dug some really
3 good mortar pits. I remember the ground; it was hard as rock. I mean it was just, oh my
4 god, it was just chip, chip, chip, chip. We finally dug some really outstanding mortars.
5 Those things are still there to this day, I know! We were set, we had our mortar pits and
6 after we got through our mortars pits, I don't remember—it wasn't that day, well, it
7 might've been, I remember we dug auxiliary positions. After what we saw there, we
8 didn't trust nobody but ourselves.

9 PN: How strong was this group?

10 KR: It was a platoon; we were a mortar platoon. About twenty-eight men because
11 we were a little short. We had three mortars. Then we were—at the time, we were C, 1st
12 of the 7th, while we were there. B Company, some of the men went out—some of the men
13 were on the mortars and the others were protecting us because we didn't trust anything.
14 Then, I think, I don't remember what time it was but some of the men in our platoon went
15 out to pick up the American dead. They were all around us, we were in the middle of it.
16 North Vietnamese, Viet Cong, you can tell the difference because North Vietnamese had
17 the tan clothes on, and the others had the pajamas on. I remember—I don't remember too
18 much about picking up the dead because I wasn't one of the dead, I was in charge of that
19 mortar, it was my job. Some of the men in our squad did go out and pick up Americans.
20 God—well, I remember putting them the helicopters, I remember that. That was on the
21 15th. I really didn't think it was over with because most of the bad things that happened
22 over there, happened after dark. The mortar rounds we had; the men started to get them
23 ready. Joe Lynn, he was the assistant gunner, he started getting them down. We were
24 very fortunate, this mortar platoon was, because we were trained to fire without the fire
25 direction center. We were probably one of few mortar platoons in the army that was
26 trained like that because, well, J.D. Coleman was our company commander back in the
27 States, and he was a Korean War Veteran. Both our platoon sergeants were Korean War
28 veterans and the things that they taught us just wasn't taught to the average mortar
29 platoon. Most mortar platoons are taught long-range firing, we were taught close-range
30 firing. So we knew that whatever happened that night was going to be damn close to us
31 and we prepared for it. I think Joe, I don't remember exactly how many rounds he had

1 ready, I think he had fifteen or eighteen ready and it was zero charge. We were
2 underneath a tree, that's when the bad things—we were in the trees amongst the dead. It
3 was about close to four o'clock in the morning, this guy came up, he was a lieutenant. He
4 came up to our position and he wanted illumination. I was in a foxhole with Pemberton at
5 the time. The auxiliary foxhole, which was close to the FDC, the fire direction center, and
6 we were close net, but we were in a half moon and I could hear what they're saying. The
7 lieutenant wanted illumination because he could hear things out there and he thought
8 something was out there. He wanted illumination and we set the mortars up when we
9 were ready to fire illumination. It was turned down, and I don't know why it was turned
10 down, what it was turned down. I heard two stories on this, one it was turned down by
11 artillery. The other that the lieutenant didn't want too far because he didn't want to give
12 our position away. Well, he was cussing. He was mad, he was very angry, he was very
13 verbal about it. He kind of shamed us. I wanted it far. Anyways, this guy left. He was
14 cussing, he was cussing. His exact words were, "You sons of bitches better—by god" I'm
15 not going to say exactly what he said, "Better by god be ready to far it, when you hear a
16 bugle blow." I think that guy was Rescorla, Lieutenant Rescorla. We were supporting B
17 2nd of the 7th. That's who I think that guy was. He shamed us. He knew—that man knew
18 exactly what the hell was going on. I think he was one of the few people down there at
19 that place that knew exactly what was going on. He was a smart man. Anyway, he hadn't
20 left too long and my god everything—one spot in front of the line, in front of us just
21 opened up. My god, all hell broke loss. It just erupted; the whole line just incoming.
22 Before that happened though, I could see very tiny lights out there. I remember seeing all
23 these little lights coming at us in a distance. That was before somebody opened up. But
24 you could see them, they looked like little cigarettes out there, lit all up. I heard whistles;
25 I think it was whistles I heard. God, all hell broke loose. Whole line—once one part
26 opened up, they all opened up. I mean, the forest coming in, the tracers. They were
27 wrecking our position. This one machine gun was really interested in us. The FDC, I kept
28 howling over there for them, they howled forward mission, instantly. Well, it happened
29 so fast, that we had to do it by yourselves, like we were trained by those Korean War
30 veterans. It happened exactly like they said it was going to happen. We had the mortars
31 straight up. It was underneath this tree and I was just terrified it was going to hit. Because

1 if it would've hit that tree, every person would have been dead. After the first couple
2 rounds for it, it helped, because when we had forwarded earlier during the day, some of
3 the rounds killed a sniper in the trees, earlier in the day. It wasn't far under the tree; in the
4 direction that we swung the mortar. We were far into the left. I was afraid it was going to
5 hit that tree. That's one of the things that terrified me at the time, I remember that. It was
6 zero charge, it's what we thought. We could see where the fire was coming from, so
7 that's what we put the mortar fire on. I give the gentlemen a copy of that particular fire
8 mission. It wasn't the only one that fired, but it was the one I trained on for two years.
9 Except I made—it was three across and three down that one I trained, that's the one I
10 practiced with, you know, the Sergeants from Korea taught me. But I made it four across
11 to reach that guy that was trying to kill us because he was wrecking our platoon over with
12 machine gun fire. I don't know, I think I got him. I remember that because it was the first
13 time that we fired on troops in the open, you know. I knew that the rounds were killing
14 people. It was one of the two times that we fired on troops in the open while I was in
15 Vietnam. That was as a mortar gunner and later, it was a place called Bong Son, and I
16 was a squad leader at that time. We fired so much, it was about the third round we fired,
17 maybe the fourth round that this machine gun got interested in us. He was trying to kill us
18 because I could see the tracers coming in. But I went to the left, I ducked down after
19 about the third round and a canister—they were all over the place, it went flying by my
20 head there and I knew it had been hit by a bullet. I just kept on with my job and we kept
21 putting mortar fire on them and controlled mortar fire, might I add. It may have been a
22 forward mission without the forward direction center, but we were highly trained. I
23 remember about halfway through—at first, I could hear everything going on. Then all I
24 could hear was the mortar rounds hitting. In the pattern that we were using. That's all I
25 could hear; I couldn't hear anything else. That's all, everything got quiet. I don't know
26 whether I was concentrating so much, but that's all I could hear, was the mortar rounds
27 hitting out there amongst the guys. Somewhere along the way, I don't know who was
28 helping us, but guys had—because we fired so damn many mortars rounds that tube was
29 red hot. Then I got afraid that, oh god, that was going to cook around and kill us all
30 because it was glowing in the dark, like a cigarette. Pemberton, I think it was Pemberton,
31 he was pouring water out our canteens on that damn mortar, trying to cool it off. We're

1 still firing and he's pouring water on it. I don't know, somewhere in there, we ran out of
2 ammunition, because we fired all of the rounds our platoon had. I don't remember the
3 time, I can't remember the time, what the laps was in there, you know?

4 PN: Yes.

5 KR: But I look up and here's Arpan and Gunnerson. They'd gone to the CP
6 (Command Post) or someplace, I don't know where they got it, but they're back with
7 more ammunition, so that we were able to continue. We kept constant mortar fire during
8 that attack. That head of B Company, 2nd of the 7th and that's who we were firing in
9 support of and we kept constant mortar fire out there, in a controlled pattern. I remember
10 one-time Sergeant Cruz; he was the squad leader. He crawled out of the mortar pit and he
11 was going to throw a hand grenade on what he thought was a couple of North Vietnamese
12 up there and I don't remember the details, it's been too damn many years. Once we
13 started firing, mostly what I heard was our rounds, I still hear them out there hitting. It's
14 just like everything got quiet, except for what I was listening for. It's just really wild. I
15 remember the tracers coming in on us, I remember they were different colors, they
16 weren't like ours, you know. They were green and it was obvious you can tell they were
17 shooting at you. I remember the next day, let's see that would be the morning of the 17th.
18 I remember the guys in front of us going out, the line in front of us, they went out. They
19 didn't get very far, and you heard all this shooting and noise and stuff, and they came
20 back and then the planes came in and bombed. My god, that one bomb was—it was a
21 huge thing. It just rocked you. Then they went back out again. We had a mad minute that
22 morning, that's where everybody fought in the trees and all this stuff, I remember that.
23 Then it's all a blurred there for a little bit. I remember we buried some of the North
24 Vietnamese dead around us, you know, they were stinking. They were bloated up and
25 they were starting to stink. I remember we got ready for the night and we'd been up—
26 well, I didn't get much sleep the 14th. The evening of the 14th, so I was up most of the
27 14th. I was up the 15th, the night of the 15th. The 16th, the 17th we—I think that was when
28 we led the way out of X-Ray and we went north because I knew the direction, because I'd
29 take the compass readings. We went north. I carried a North Vietnamese machine gun out
30 of X-Ray. It was my forty-pound bipod and my weapon, I mean, heavy machine gun.
31 Had the round slip on it, you know. We got to a point on the trail where there were

1 bodies. The Americans had already been policed up at that time, it was just North
2 Vietnamese, Viet Cong dead. But there was a hell of a lot of them. We got to this one
3 place where they had dropped napalm on these guys, I just got sick at my stomach. I
4 don't know whether it was not being any sleep, or nerves, or the smell. The hair, the
5 burnt hair, they were just horribly burnt. I got sick at my stomach. Right past that was a
6 big ravine. I took the round clip off this machine gun and I know I shouldn't have done it,
7 but I couldn't go any further carrying that heavy stuff and I threw it off over that ravine.
8 On down the road, I threw the clip away, but they probably used that against us later. I
9 always regretted doing that. I remember the artillery, Colonel Tully was our battalion
10 commander, everyone thought very highly of him. We knew that he had our best interest
11 at heart. He wasn't one of those guys that talked the game, he walked it too. He took care
12 of his men. We were one of the few outfits that had artillery, we walked behind artillery. I
13 mean, you weren't going to surprise anybody over there anyway. We got to a point where
14 we went straight ahead and some of the units, 1st of the 5th I think, some elements of the
15 1st and the 5th and 2nd of the 7th, went left to what is called Albany now. I remember we
16 got to Columbus and we got a hot meal there. I don't remember if it was then or later, but
17 I remember all this stuff coming in about Albany. We got ready, we dropped what we
18 were doing, we put our gear on and we were going to go help those guys. We were
19 listening to all this because all of us has friends there. I knew men that was in Albany
20 because 1st of the 5th, that was our sister battalion.

21 PN: Of course.

22 KR: We were listening to this stuff coming on board, it broke our hearts. I don't
23 know, I think that was, to me, that was worse than the battle. At X-Ray. But X-Ray
24 wasn't the worst thing I was in, to be honest with you, I—well, anyways let me complete
25 this. We were—from Columbus we left on the 18th. Went to a place, let's see what it was
26 called—Crooks. I think it was called Crooks. I remember we got mortared here. The
27 North Vietnamese mortared us. I remember we got mortared, then in my mind kind of
28 goes out on me a little bit. The other action we saw was at, I think was in February, we
29 went back to base camp. Then in February, we were at Bong Son.

30 PN: Of course.

1 KR: We wasn't—we were in the hills of Bong Son and the 5th Cav was there. I
2 remember we were up there in this big mountain, with big rocks and elephant grass and
3 stuff like that. We were forting B Company, 2nd of the 5th. They got hit down there and
4 they called for artillery, but artillery couldn't reach them because the trajectory was
5 wrong, and we did get our mortars in there and supported them. This was the other time
6 that we fought on troops. We knew we were killing men with our rounds. I remember
7 something about B-52s there too, but I don't remember what the heck it was. I just can't
8 remember that. I remember firing, we fired three mortars, fire for effect on troops in
9 open. We felt good about that, I remember that at the time because everything that
10 happened at Albany. I felt good about it, I mean I didn't feel bad about doing it
11 because—at X-Ray, down in the Ia Drang, I learned what it is to be a combat solider, and
12 I'm going to tell you what my definition of a combat solider, that's a man that has been so
13 afraid, it's like a drug addict. Like a picture drug addict, you know they get that one high,
14 and they keep trying to obtain it, but they can never get that high again. Once you've
15 reached that level of fear, you can never reach it again. Nothing ever is going to make
16 you that afraid again. That's a combat solider. Anyway, we fought on those troops out in
17 open. My god here comes this thing over the radio, that one of our rounds landed in
18 foxhole and killed two men. God, that just devastated our whole platoon. Then they fought
19 out that it wasn't us doing it! They had us stop firing on these troops in open then and
20 they found out that it was the North Vietnamese that were mortaring them, and it wasn't
21 us! Our mortars were hitting on top of the troops, the North Vietnamese. I can't
22 remember if it was that day or the next day, we went down there where this happened at,
23 there was a little creek down there and the caption said, it was M105s recoilless rifles, it's
24 been a lot of years. They captured one of those and they were down there. And .50
25 Caliber machine guns, they captured one of those. It was by a little creek and the foxhole.
26 I remember going over to the foxhole, where this round hit them at. I remember looking
27 down there and I saw a piece of a skull that just had some hair on it. To me, it didn't look
28 like an 81 round, it was a 60-millimeter mortar round that had landed in the foxhole. I
29 think PFC (Private First Class) Love got killed there. He was out of our company. He was
30 forward observer, and he was RTO for West. I think West got hit there, wounded there,
31 with B Company. Then, after we got back, well my squad leader—I was in charge of the

1 mortar then, I wasn't following orders there because I was squad leader, because
2 Sergeant Cruz had been in the hospital for Malaria. When he came back, it was at that
3 time that I went out as a forward observer. Just an artillery mortar fire and I went out with
4 recon and whoever they wanted me out. But usually, I went out with B Company, 2nd of
5 the 5th and recon. We went out every day because they were so short of trained forward
6 observers over there. That's just one—the things I really wanted to get on record. I
7 wanted to get on record that our platoon flying into X-Ray, the morning of the 15th
8 because that wasn't—I'd like to know who the pilots were that flew us in there. I'd like to
9 know why that guy that was in charge of those people going into Albany didn't take
10 artillery off of Colonel Tully. Because I think if it had that crash in front of him, I don't
11 think they'd gotten in the mess they were in, because it really hurt us. That's about all I
12 have to say.

13 PN: Thank you, sir.

14 (End of interview)